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University of Alberta

Sisters and Strangers:
Canadian Ethnic Women Writers

by

F. Debra Muchnik ©

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Department of Comparative Literature

Edmonton, Alberta

Fall 1995

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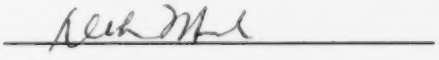

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Date..September 1, 1995.....

In loving memory of my grandmother, Dora Fromovitz,
an immigrant woman who never had the opportunity
to write her story.

ABSTRACT

Mary di Michele, Mary Melfi, Régine Robin, and Monique Bosco are four exemplary Canadian ethnic women writers. Their novels embark on journeys that are both "destabilizing and recentring," as they write their complex identities through an intensive use of language that incorporates a present and an ancestral past in an ethno-cultural imaginary.

In each chapter I incorporate a brief analysis of their language usage, as defined by Gobard's linguistic system. The first chapter examines the ethnic woman's desire to obliterate the failures of her past in an attempt to come to terms with a complex present lived in the margins of Quebec society. The chapter will focus on Melfi's Infertility Rites and Bosco's La femme de Loth, comparing and contrasting their notion of success in contemporary Canada.

Chapter two focuses on di Michele's Under My Skin and Bosco's La femme de Loth, exploring the need of ethnic women to establish autonomy in their lives through an exploration of the female body and sexuality: more specifically, by writing their bodies to achieve power as ethnic women.

Chapter three examines the alienation and fragmentation that is experienced by ethnic women in Régine Robin's La Québécoite, where the author/protagonist attempts to integrate herself as an ethnic woman in Montreal through the act of writing. I will also look at the writings of all four authors to demonstrate how they examine the silence of the past, to come to terms with what is a fragmented and alienating existence for ethnic women in Canada.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Canadian marriages trap imported brides. Women, who have been brought to Canada for arranged marriages, are suffering from abuse by their husbands and their husbands' families. They are afraid to leave their husbands for fear of being deported to their countries of origin.

Audrey Smith, a Jamaican visitor to Canada, was forced to take off her clothes in downtown Toronto in broad daylight for a routine search by police.

Domestic workers are forced to live at their employers' homes for a two year period before they can apply for immigrant status. In some instances these women are being abused, harassed, and overworked, but they don't have anyone to report these crimes to as they are not Canadian citizens.

Aboriginal women were not included and given representation of their own at the Charlottetown Accord. They were concerned that their needs were not going to be met.

Young Moslem girls were sent home from a school in Montreal for wearing the hajib, their traditional garb.[1]

The influx of immigrant women entering Canada, all of whom bring with them histories rich and varied in experience, is a history largely unwritten. Many women from undeveloped countries enter Canada as domestic workers on temporary work permits, or as "family class" immigrants who depend for their livelihood on the head of the household or their sponsor (Ng 204). Many of these women live in a state of powerlessness due to their doubly inferior status in Canada: as immigrants and as women. Many find themselves relieved at being one step removed from oppressive patriarchal cultures, only to then find themselves within a new country bound once again to subservient roles, without familial support, suffering their fates in silence.

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[1] The above newsworthy items were gathered from Canadian news reports (in the newspaper and on the radio) between 1993 and 1995.

The small sampling of recent newspaper stories above, highlights the harsh realities that Canadian immigrant women face upon immigrating to Canada. As George Grant states, being a Canadian is a complex fate (Jackel 108). If so, being a Canadian woman and an immigrant is a fate beyond complexity. Roberta Sciff-Zamaro, herself an Italian ethnic writer, questions the role and function of the ethnic woman writer living in Canada: by asking "what does it mean?" Few confront these painful struggles as intimately as Canadian ethnic women writers, who with their pen and past experiences relive, reimagine and tear the silence off that complex fate. That is the task of the Canadian ethnic woman writer, and it is a task that has only recently found acceptance and support within the ethnic and cultural mosaic that is Canada.

A. The politics of ethnicity

> Of the French in Canada, Lord Durham said, "They have no history." Of the English in Canada, English parliamentarians might be tempted to say, "They know no history." And of both, the perennial question remains (as Northrop Frye puts it) not: who are they? but: where are they? The etymology of the "Canada," is, in one version, Portuguese, "Ca nada"--translating crudely as "There is no one here." or "Nothing here at all" (Mandel 1986, 29-30).

The dilemma of forging national unity from a binational society while attempting to include the many ethnic groups that have emigrated to Canada into this equation, has preoccupied the political leaders of Canada since 1867. The Canadian preoccupation with establishing an independant nation separate from its British colonial roots however has required the confirmation and acknowledgement of the rights of the "other," the French, within Canada.

Mediating this problematic marriage of two official languages and cultures however, has resulted in the invisibility of Canada's fourth solitude--the culture of the

immigrant--until recently.[2] One can see that since Confederation, various legislation has attempted to coalesce the diversity of English and French peoples into a Canadian whole. The British North America Act of 1867 was the first piece of legislation to encourage ethnic diversity by recognizing certain rights for religious groups (Catholics and Protestants) and linguistic groups (Anglophones and Francophones), legitimating a collectivistic approach to the notion of rights (Shaffir and Weinfeld 15).

This notion of collective rights of English Canada had an unfortunate consequence for both immigrants arriving to Canada and the French minority in Canada. The new immigrant felt threatened and alienated by collective rights, which predominated in their countries of origin, and championed individual rights as an alternative to the oppression they experienced in their previous homes. Collective rights were especially divisive in Quebec, when those rights were determined from an English-Canadian perspective, absent Québécois consultation.[3] As such, biculturalism and multiculturalism languished for the first 100 years of this country's existence, at the expense of the collective.

It was not until 1970 when "The Report of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism" appeared, that Canadians began as a people to examine the political and cultural construct of the country in which they were living. The fourth volume of the report, called "The Cultural Contribution of Other Ethnic Groups," was perhaps the first official acknowledgement that Canada was not only bicultural but multicultural as well.

---

[2] Canada's native peoples being the third solitude.

[3] The philosophy of the Parti Québécois held collective rights and needs of the collectivity on a higher plane than individual rights and needs.

However, as E.D. Blodgett points out, the flaw of the Report, which concerns the relation between language and culture, was that Canada had already moved beyond being a bi-cultural and bi-national nation. While the Report states "that language is in the first place an essential expression of a culture," and even moreso, "the principal element" of a culture, it failed to realize a Canada beyond two official languages (Cited in Blodgett 14).

Blodgett thus questions the fate of the cultures of "the other ethnic groups" if their languages are not preserved. He notes the Report contradictorily comments that "nobody will maintain that group still has a living culture, in the full sense of the term, when it is forced to use another language in order to express to itself the realities which make up a large part of its daily life" (Cited in Blodgett 2).

Yet according to the Royal Commission, "the ethnic group is defined as an entity that will arbitrarily, voluntarily, perhaps even rationally, abandon a sense of origin and a linguistic habit, in order to become part of multicultural and bilingual Canada." As Eli Mandel surmised from his reading of the Royal Commission Report, "what counts most in our concept of "ethnic group" is not one's ethnic origin or even one's mother tongue, but one's sense of belonging to a group, and the group's collective will to exist" (Cited in Mandel 1978, 275).

In 1988, with the passage of Bill C-93 "The Act for the Preservation and Enhancement of Multiculturalism in Canada," the Canadian notion of multiculturalism was enshrined in law and fully came to recognize and promote Canadian cultural and racial diversity. The Act, however, in its definition section, differentiates and defines the terms "ethnic" and "immigrant." Robert Harney remarks "[l]eaders have generally preferred to think of those they represent as ethnic groups rather than immigrant groups since *immigrant* conjures up the thresholds of acculturation while *ethnic* implies a permanent quality of

otherness" (Kamboureli 1993ii, 208).

Smaro Kamboureli, clarifying Harney's ethnic/immigrant thesis from a female immigrant perspective, states that an immigrant remains an outsider as defined by his/her origins, whereas the ethnic subject's difference is defined by the surrounding culture. Using this interpretation of the Royal Commission and the Multiculturalism Act, one can foresee the greater level of cultural control Canadian governments would have over the ethnic's "surrounding culture" and therefore over the ethnic in contrast to the lack of control it would have over the immigrant's "origins."

Defining the emergence of ethnic groups in Canada in purely legal terms must ultimately give way to a definition less political and more literary for the purpose of my thesis. James Bullivant defines an "ethnic group" as "a collectivity within a larger society, having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past, and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements defined as the epitome of their peoplehood" (Cited in Schoenfeld 19). Another definition goes on to define ethnic identity as "a positive personal attitude and attachment to a group with whom the individual believes he has a common ancestry based on shared characteristics and shared socio-cultural experiences" (Rudolf and Berry 306).

But as Rudolf Kalin and J.W. Berry point out, ethnicity does not necessarily represent ethnic origin. The authors distinguish between "behavioural" and "symbolic" ethnic identity. Behavioural "consists of outward expressions, such as being able to speak a heritage language and use it frequently, choosing best friends primarily from one's own group, practising endogamy, and belonging to ethnic and/or religious organizations of one's group," whereas symbolic ethnic identity consists of knowledge and pride in one's ethnic origin, a psychological affiliation. This may or may not be accompanied by behavioural expression of this identity

(Rudolf and Berry 306).

Both the Jewish and the Italian communities comprise a visible part of the Canadian mosaic and manifest high ethnic self-definition. Both cultures shared similar experiences as new immigrants in Canada, i.e., crowded housing, oppressive labour conditions, discrimination in social and economic opportunities, etc. What does distinguish their experience as emigrés, is the difference of their histories preceeding their arrival in Canada.

Jews slowly began to arrive in Canada in the eighteenth century, those first new-comers settling in Quebec. It was not until the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries however, that the waves of immigration from the former Czarist Russian Empire began to transform the face of Canada. Many of those early Jewish refugees left a Russia rife with anti-semitism as characterized by state sanctioned pogroms: over fourty thousand Ashkenazic Jews entered Canada in search of freedom between 1901 and 1921 alone (Melançon 12). These eastern European Jews shaped much of the character of the early Jewish community in Canada, and in finding religious and political freedom here, quickly began adopting Canada as their new home.

Early Italian immigrants to Canada could not conceive of this cold, barren land as home. An adventurous Giovanni Caboto saw it as an obstacle on the way to Asia, and Francesco Bressani, a Jesuit missionary writing in the mid 1600s perceived his stay in a rather harsh light in his book Breve Relatione (Pivato 1985ii, 172).

In the 1890s and the early 1900s, Canada permitted Italian men to come to Canada to satisfy a need for inexpensive and unskilled labour, necessary for the development and exploitation of natural resources in the Canadian North. These new Italian immigrants were an ideal labour pool (as are most immigrants to Canada who come from oppressive and economically impoverished homelands),

characterized by their docile nature and their willingness to accept very low wages. Of course, their presence in the new land lead to hostile feelings, racial prejudice and isolation in the communities they were settled in (Micone 153).

Many of these men came to Canada without their wives and children for two to three years in order to afford to bring their families over. And it is their history which has profoundly affected the collective memory and identity of Italian immigrants, so much so that it seems to emerge both consciously and unconsciously in their writing (Pivato 1994, 153). As the son of one Italian immigrant states:

> I denounced the power structure in Italy for throwing out my parents and their generation; I denounced the power structure of Canada for exploiting them as cheap labour. I denounced the power structure of the Italian community in Canada for using them for material gain... it is probably not even right to refer to Italians in Canada as Italians. Immigration has made them something else. Whatever they are, they are not Italian (Micone cited in Bagnell 235).

Italian immigration did not reach the proportions of earlier Jewish migrations until post World War II. Many Italians then were forced to leave Italy due to earlier social reforms which had dispossesed many rural folk from their land and ultimately of a means to support themselves. The rush to emigrate was further compounded by the destruction of the Italian war economy, which rendered much of Italy unable to provide for its citizens' basic needs.

Having left behind rich and vibrant cultures in their countries of origin and facing new found discrimination in their adoptive country, Italians and Jews found writing to be a very suitable outlet to express stories which reflected their new identities. As both cultures established their presence in the early 1900s, a definite type of ethnic writing began to emerge.

This type of ethnic writing combined both fiction and social history, resulting in the creation of a literary

history for both cultures (Dimić 1990ii, 3). Thus the emergence of marginal forms or genres of literary writing, such as translations, texts in newspapers, travel writing, and prefaces and manifestos, found a place for ethnic writing (Dimić 1990ii, 5).

Although ethnic writing was initially viewed as "quaint, exotic, but not important" and was originally defined as writing in languages other than the official languages of French and English, it drew much attention to itself, especially in the early 1970s (Pivato 1985i, 27). Joseph Pivato illustrates the xenophobic attitude everpresent in Canada at this time, as evidenced in the major themes of Canadian literary critics: Frye's "garrison mentality," Atwood's "survival," and Stratford's "ellipse with two centres," which excluded minority writing (Pivato 1994, 69). Immigrant writers were unrealistically expected to assimilate into the anglophone or francophone communities. According to the critic Raymond August:

> The Jewish and Asiatic races may prove to be the most recalcitrant as they are highly tradition-oriented, endogamous, and prone to stigmatization.... Ethnic literature will develop as an artificial bi-product of insulated growth, a black cultured pearl, nurtured under the protective shell of Canadian-style tolerance: acceptance without concern (Cited in Pivato 1985i, 28).

Despite their initial exclusion from the Canadian literary scene, ethnic writers grew more prevalent and slowly began to inscribe their place in oral and written texts. In the 1920s and 1930s, successful ethnic writers, such as A.M. Klein, established the possibility of a minority perspective within Canadian literature which developed Jewish-Canadian writing from one generation to the next (Padolsky 1994, 363).

Italian language literature evolved in Canada with the development of English and French writers of Italian-Canadian origin, born in the 1940s and 1950s, who were educated partly in Canada and published in one of its official languages (Pivato 1990i, 289). Upon discovering themselves as writers,

they uncovered earlier Italian language writers' works. Due to these literary leaders a working definition of ethnic writing evolved: that being the meeting of two or more cultures in which one of the cultures is anglophone or francophone, incorporating a tension or conflict and exploring inter-relationships of various peoples (Pivato 1985i, 30).

As varied as the styles of writing were that developed to comprise what is referred to in this thesis as "ethnic writing," so too vary the names given to this form of writing. The term "minority literature"[4] added to the list of names for this new Canadian form of writing which includes amongst others: "multicultural writer," "migrant writer," and "ethnic writer." These terms were coined to mark those writers in Canada who were not of French or British ancestry, and no doubt pointed to their presence on the literary scene as "other."

As a category deemed other by fellow writers and critics, ethnic writers found critical acceptance amongst other ethnic writers and critics from other lands. Their job description, shaped by their national origin, religion, and choice of language, had already been established for them. They were responsible for:

> rewriting the text of their ancestors, writing new texts, rewriting the texts of Canadian literature, rewriting the context that has been assigned them, and writing texts in two, three, or more languages, of which only one may be visible on paper, but of which the translations are undeniable shadows of the physical text (Verdicchio 1990ii, 54).

---

[4] Borrowed by Fulvio Caccia from Kafka, as Deleuze and Guattari used in their study published in 1975, Kafka--Pour une littérature mineure, on the writer from Prague.

B. Language and ethnicity

> In trying to deal with inherited themes and structures Italian-Canadian [and Jewish-Canadian] writers have had to translate them into English-Canadian or French-Canadian codes. This may involve finding a new language or languages in order to give voice to the once voiceless immigrant (Pivato 1990i, 295).

Minority writing in English or in other languages "derives from and relates to diverse and specific literary, linguistic, and social histories and traditions" (Padolsky 1994, 380). The language of a minority literature, as Gilles Deleuze states, is a language that has no fixed roots and that adapts with each crossing of boundaries.

Such a linguistic transformation stimulated by a quest for the writer's own cultural identity foregrounds the unique discursive style adopted in ethnic writing. By creating the reality of the "other" while describing it, the ethnic writer, divided into an acting self and observing self, employs a system of language to communicate her/his "différance"[5] with the rest of the world.

Jewish and Italian ethnic writers in Canada use English, French as well as other languages and/or dialects to express themselves. Those writers who have neither French nor English as their mother tongue, regardless of when they came to Canada, are referred to as "allophones" in Quebec and are considered part of the "heritage language group" in Anglo-Canada, marking their otherness. For the ethnic writer,

---

[5] "The term refers to Jacques Derrida's key linguistic and philosophic concept, in which he says, he uses the spelling "-ance" instead of "-ence" in the noun to indicate a fusion of two senses of the French verb "différer": to be different, and to defer. The point of this double sense is that on the one hand there is an "effect" of meaning in an utterance which is produced by its difference from other meanings, but that on the other hand, since this meaning can never come to rest in an actual presence, its determinate specification is deferred from one substitutive linguistic interpretation to another, without end" (Abrams 204).

language is the symbol of her/his refusal to disappear (Paré 12).

The linguistic model proposed by Henri Gobard (elaborated on by Deleuze and Guattari and used with specific reference to a cultural group by Fulvio Caccia) explores the language dilemma faced in ethnic writing. Henri Gobard constructs a model of language, a "linguistic quadripartition," in order to serve a didactic function (Gobard 1972, 60). Characterizing this four-part language system, Gobard's system is critiqued in terms of spatio-temporality and acculturation by Deleuze and Guattari. Gobard's argument is as follows: the "vernacular language," being the rural, territorial and maternal tongue of affection, signifies the 'here and now;' the "vehicular language," the urban language of societal communication, commerce, circulation and deterritorialization, connotes the 'everywhere;' the "referential language" operates in the outer national, cultural, and academic spheres and facilitates a recollection or reconstruction of the past, cultural reterritorialization, signifying 'over there;' and the mythic language enables a return to the "horizon" of spiritual and religious reterritorialization, existing in the 'beyond.' Gobard's linguistic system therefore serves to modify the ethnic writer's relationship with language that varies with group, time, and place.

With regards to Gobard's language system, the act of writing provides its readers with a message, implying an "addresser" and an "addressee" who function on four different levels: firstly, they operate on an interior emotive and connotative level, an expression of affection and intimacy (vernacular function); secondly, as a means of communication of information (vehicular function); thirdly, on a poetic level, they choose from different elements and combinations to create a verbalising context (referential function); and lastly, on a metalinguistic level in which the "addresser" and "addressee" collaborate (mythic level) (Gobard 1976, 12).

Fulvio Caccia has analyzed the choice of French language for italophone writers using the four levels of language proposed by Henri Gobard which characterizes the complex relationship of the writer's Italian origin to the languages: the Italian dialect would be the vernacular that represents the language of remembrance and exile; English and/or French is the vehicular language which serves as the first break with the maternal language and the first manifestation of change (the "primary deterritorialization" as named by Deleuze and Guattari); French and/or English is the referential langauge that begins the process of reterritorialization; and Italian is the mythical language, one of power, a mark of class, of social mobility and language of the Church, of the Golden Age, of union, from before the migratory Fall, the language of return, the last reterritorialization (Caccia 1985ii, 156-159).

Caccia draws a parallel in the case of Jewish-Canadian writing (of European origin) in which the use of Yiddish parallels that of the Italian dialect vernacular, while Hebrew plays the same "mythic" role as literary and Church Italian. For both Italian-Canadian and Jewish-Canadian writers, the variable for the vehicular and referential languages would be determined by the region of Canada in which they live. Caccia's analysis of the linguistic options highlights the connection between linguistic and cultural identity. As Jacques Lacan states, the function of language is to assume that one exists and nothing more (Gobard 1976, 25). But how 'one exists' poses a problem of authentification for the displaced writer, as woman and immigrant.

C. Ethnic women writers

Ethnic women writers face a double-edged sword with regard to their outer world and their interior reality, for the linguistic model applied to women's writing is extremely

complex. "The writing of women," as Marguerite Duras explains, "is really translated from the unknown, like a new way of communicating rather than an already formed language" (Yaeger 1988, 151). Therefore there is a need to modify the formal linguistic system created by Gobard to allow a place for female "différance."

Throughout the course of history, women have been forced to maintain a silent position in the public and patriarchal domain. In order to combat the imposed silence, women writers began inventing emancipatory strategies in language that disrupt and deterritorialize as well as reconstruct and reterritorialize the terms of the dominant culture to permit female acculturation, by exploring linguistic games and inscribing themselves in their texts (Yaeger 1988, 152). Patricia Yaegar explains some of the differences in female writing:

> ...for women, writing is not just an act that permits the overcoming of personal silence, but of *men's silence* as well, since writing, as physical act, gives women an unprecedented power of dialogue with the dominant tradition, revealing its violence. This vision of women's writing asks that we controvert Derrida's thesis that writing and speech are coequal.... In a world where women are not allowed public speech, writing gives the literary woman a physical power the spoken word often lacks: namely, the power to cite someone else's words at length in order to interrupt the citation and change its intent (Yaeger 1988, 156).

By formulating and implanting a metalinguistic, intertextual, and dialogic feminized discourse in Canadian literary texts, women in Canada can recreate a lost heritage of writing, re-establish their own realities, and be liberated from patriarchal culture and language--"breaking that circuit of meaning in which women have been the objects of circulation" (Yaeger 1988, 161).

In ascribing a status to ethnic writing, the question remains, how have Canadian ethnic women writers expanded the task of this corpus of minority literature existent in other

countries? The answer is twofold. As ethnic writers in Canada they could "expand the tradition of *survival* to include a tradition of the *journey,*" and as women writers they could also enlarge "the male thematic tradition of love and death to include birth" (di Michele 1990, 16-17).

As well, ethnic women writers not only write about revulsion against one's loss of self-identity, but also write about the "intersecting" identities created by a network of familial relations, race, class, political allegiances, and state apparatuses from a woman's perspective (Neuman and Stephenson 3). In their expression of these "intersecting" identities, we see the challenge of the doubly oppressed *ethnic woman* writer.

The *journey* of redefining one's identity was embraced by many ethnic women writers. Other themes examined by the ethnic writer are many and varied including: exile, dislocation, discrimination, acculturation, assimilation, multiple subjectivity, identity as something of a provisional and vulnerable salience, language issues, and problems of duality. What distinguishes ethnic women writers' protagonists is that they embrace a polyphonic language to express their personal stories in order to define their social and cultural selves.

Many ethnic Italian writers choose to tell their stories in a realist manner. This style of writing is exemplified by Maria Ardizzi, who chooses to write in Italian, the language of her country of origin, thereby reducing her opportunity to make her ethnic voice heard in Canada.

Ardizzi's first novel, Made in Italy, represents an experience of immigration (in this instance not her own) through a heroine who embarks on a mythical quest into the beyond to escape the despair and imprisonment of her inner world. Never learning the language of acculturation, Ardizzi's protagonist is a first generation immigrant unable to transcend her physical and emotional isolation. It is not

surpirising that Ardizzi, who came to Canada later in her life, creates an old world submissive type of mother as her protagonist who ultimately ends up paralyzed in her new country.

In contrast to Ardizzi, there is a gap between first generation women writers who arrived as adults to Canada and those writers who grew up in Canada in the 1970s. It can be seen in a destabilizing of their relationship to language, bringing about a "recentring" in which the younger writers exploit their confused ethnic identity through intensive use of language as a vehicle for self-expression. Their immigrant journey involves a search for a more positive, life-affirming cultural identity in Canada expressed in either of the official languages of the new country.

D. Thesis statement

This technique of "destabilizing and recentring" has been mastered by postmodern ethnic women writers, such as Mary Melfi, Mary di Michele, Régine Robin, and Monique Bosco. These writers, whose works I propose to examine in my thesis, prefer avant-garde writing, and in so doing, use a variety of language levels and languages, including syntactic, semantic, and phonological markers of the minority language, or dialectical and sociological features (Dimić 1990i, 18).

Building on this quest of ethnic women writers in Canada, di Michele, Melfi, Robin, and Bosco incorporate the time and place of their ancestors in a new ethno-cultural "imaginary,"[6] which reveals itself through three dominant themes: failure versus success, dependence versus autonomy, and fragmentation versus integration. The notion of "non-

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[6] The French term is "imaginaire" for which there is no English equivalent. It represents a cultural reality; that is, the world as it appears in a novel, play or photograph, or on television: what we understand life to be through our arts.

identity", contrary to Ardizzi, is seen as both valuable and catastrophic, and ultimately underlines their protagonists' "[q]uestion du lieu, question de l'être, question de la mémoire: triple interrogation," the quest of ethnic women writers (Nepveu 1988, 183). All four writers render visible the experience of these two unique cultures and that of immigrant women's voices, who for many of us (I too am the daughter of an immigrant), are silent in Canadian literary history.

In my discussion with each author I learned that they all feel as if they have lived and as if their identities are split into several lives. Monique Boscovitz was born an only child in Vienna in 1927, and after the divorce of her parents (Jewish but not religious) she moved to Paris in 1931 with her mother and grandmother. Raised by her grandmother from 4 years of age, she quickly assimilated into the French milieu, erasing all traces of her Austrian background. Although she tried to obliterate her origin, it became a matter of life or death for her during World War II. As her birth certificate was from the Synagogue of Vienna, she was unable to attend school between 1940 and 1945 and was forced to hide in Paris and Marseille during the war. While living in France she was never able to obtain identity papers and therefore never became a French citizen. With her passport marked "adéterminé", Bosco emigrated to Canada in 1948 at age 21 and eventually became a Canadian citizen. Moving to Montreal, the home of her father (whom she saw very little of between 1931 until 1948), she enrolled at the University of Montreal where she received her M.A. and Ph.D. in French literature, and later became a professor there as well as a publicist at the French CBC. Although she is happy to have a determined nationality, Bosco returns to Paris for yearly visits and is still connected to its vibrant cultural life.

Régine Ajzersztejn also returns to her native Paris regularly to reacquaint herself with friends and family. She

was born in 1939 in the Belleville area of Paris (14th arrondissment) of non-religious Jewish parents. They had left their shtetl in Poland in 1932 with one son because of her father's revolutionary activities in the Communist Party. Born at the advent of the war, the climate in Paris was very cool for Jews. Her father, who had false identity papers from Belgium which identified him as a French soldier, was taken to Germany as a prisoner of war where he spent five years. Her mother hid both children and herself in people's homes in Paris during the war. Robin has fond memories of spending her days with a glamorous French courtesan, Juliette, with whom she frequented the theatre. Surviving the war, her family was eventually reunited.

Robin's Jewishness and the events of the war greatly influenced her childhood and later life. Stories of the Shtetl of Kaluszyn (her parent's home town), and central Europe became important to Robin's sense of identity and personal history. History was thus a natural area of interest and study for Robin, and she received her Licence, Maîtrise, and Agrégation in History from the Sorbonne and completed her Thèse de IIIe cycle at the University of Dijon. Following several years as a professor at the University of Paris, she emigrated to Canada in 1974 at the age of 35 (having met a Canadian man). She spent her first four years in Canada trying to obtain an equivalent teaching position in Montreal (she became a member of the Department of Sociology at the University of Quebec in 1978) as she had left behind in Paris. It was at this time in her life that she wrote <u>La Québécoite</u> (which caused her to reconsider leaving Canada for France).

Mary di Michele was born in 1949 in Lanciano, a small town scarred by the war nestled in the Abruzzi region of Italy. Living in a two-room flat, she spent a lot of time as a child with her father and his friends, unusual for a young Italian girl. In 1954 her father was sponsored by relatives in Canada. He moved to Toronto for a year to work in order to

bring his family over. The year without her father was very troubling for di Michele, but her uncle Rocco introduced her to the world of cinema where she found an escape. In 1955 at 6 years of age she, her mother, her sister and brother all emigrated to Canada, settling in Toronto. Beginning Catholic school, she was quickly assimilated into the Canadian culture, as reflected in her name change by her teacher from Maria Luisa to Mary Louise. An overweight and introverted child, di Michele developed a love of books and reading which has remained with her and led to her career of writer and academic. She went to the University of Windsor where she completed a Masters Degree in English Literature and Creative Writing under the tutelage of Joyce Carol Oates. She has been a writer in residence at many universities in Canada and is presently a professor of Creative Writing at Concordia University in Montreal.

Mary Melfi was born in Campobasso in Molise, a mountainous region of Italy in 1951 and lived with her mother's parents. Her memories were of a small grey cave-like house and of her grandparents, who were farmers there. In 1955 her father went to live with his relatives in Montreal where he worked for three years to save money to bring Mary, her older sister and her mother to Canada. When she arrived in Montreal in 1957 at the age of 6, Melfi had a hard time accepting her father who had become a stranger to her. Living with her father's family, she attended Catholic school and recognized in fellow Italian-Canadian girls, her "otherness." Despite excelling in school, she grew up feeling insecure about her abilities and identity, and felt trapped by the pressure of her parents' expectations of her to become a teacher and remain within the Italian community in Montreal. At a young age Melfi realized English was the language of power in Montreal, and with a love for literature, received a B.A. and an M.A. in English Literature. She works as a writer full time, a vocation she has pursued since high school.

In limiting my exploration of ethnic writing to Italian-Canadian and Jewish-Canadian writers, I have condensed my observations to the examination of four novels by di Michele, Melfi, Robin, and Bosco. Each author's novel examines the vicissitudes of the immigrant life through a female protagonist. In order to better understand my analysis of their works, a brief summary of each of their novels is required.

Mary Melfi's Infertility Rites, published in 1992, finds the thirty year old feminist Nina Di Fiore confronting her biological need to have a child, and her attraction to the traditional values of her youth. The biological urge conflicts with her role as a feminist artist, and ultimately confused by a new-found desire, she finds artistic inspiration in the grotesque and surreal images of children when her body fails to cooperate. Her husband Daniel, who seems to be an ideological white anglo-saxon protestant, challenges and mocks her desire for children, her obsession with her Italian origins, and her betrayal of her feminism and her art.

Mary di Michele's novel, Under My Skin, was published in 1994. Written as a story within a story, the novel examines the life of an independent ethnic woman who works in the film industry. Battling the gender politics around her, the protagonist struggles with her need for freedom from the men in her life, and the desire to be involved in a relationship with a man. She undergoes a deep psycho-sexual trauma which is camouflaged in the male character of a serial rapist. The protagonist's violation is underscored by di Michele in the text's interweaving of the world of film with the world of the modern urban landscape, "in search of a common language" (Norris 10-11).

Monique Bosco's La femme de Loth was published in 1970 and was a recipient of the Governor General's Award for fiction. The story is comprised of 240 short sections all reflecting the motif of enclosure, with one section echoing

another. "Toi" et "tu" reverberate throughout the novel as the first person narrator, Hélène, addresses her departed lover Pierre in a refrain of bitterness. The refrain is neatly bracketed within a narrative that fuses chronological sequences that encompass biblical history, family history, the immediate past, and a present that fluctuates between Montreal and Venice.

Régine Robin published her novel La Québécoite in 1983. The story revolves around a woman born and raised in Paris, now living in Montreal. The author attempts to reconnect her present and past history by interweaving her family's journey as refugees in Europe with her present journeys of looking for a home in Montreal. First passing through Snowden (in an attempt to reconstitute her Jewish identity), then moving to Outrement (in an attempt to lose herself in a Québécois identity), and finally settling in the Jean-Talon market (an attempt to come out of the margin in order to integrate into a Canadian immigrant neighbourhood).

The first chapter of my thesis will examine the driving force behind the ethnic woman's desire to obliterate the failures of her past in order to come to terms with a multifaceted present, living in the margins in Quebec. I will be focusing on Mary Melfi's Infertility Rites and Monique Bosco's La femme de Loth to compare and contrast the ethnic woman's notion of success in contemporary Canada.

Chapter two, concentrating on the works of Mary di Michele's Under My Skin and Monique Bosco's La femme de Loth, will explore the ethnic woman's need to establish autonomy for herself, primarily through an exploration of the female body and feminine sexuality, both of which function as metaphors of this desire for independence.

The third and final chapter examines the ethnic woman's experience of alienation and fragmentation, as set in the Canadian metropolis, wherein the author/protagonist attempts to achieve a semblance of integration for herself through the

act of writing. In this examination I will rely primarily on Régine Robin's text, La Québécoite, comparing and contrasting her rendering of fragmentation and alienation of the ethnic woman with the novels of Bosco, Melfi, and di Michele.

As women writers apply, explore and create language differently to make their voices heard, I will also focus on the language of female ethnic writers in Canada, as it is a vital expression of who they are. I will also attempt to apply the linguistic system established by Gobard, and elaborated on by Deleuze et Guattari and Caccia for Jewish-Canadian and Italian-Canadian writing. Thus I hope to demonstrate how the backward glances of female ethnic writers examine the burdens of their silent origins through tradition, highlighting the possibilities of existence within the Canadian mosaic that is the imaginary of Canadian ethnic women writers.

CHAPTER ONE

II. THE JOURNEY FROM FAILURE TO SUCCESS

> Failure represents an "act of rebellion or a naturalistic element." In Canadian writing, it represents self and societal-contemplation and equals success (Kroetsch 67).

As "legitimate guardians of their culture" (Stasiulus cited in Gunew and Yeatman xix), Canadian ethnic writers have acquired the "rite" to inscribe immigrant women's voices into the Canadian literary landscape, altering their journey from one of failure to success. Robert Kroetsch explains that binary patterns of ethnic writing--death and rebirth, revelation and concealment, integration and resistance, forgetting and remembering, destruction and creation, *failure and success*--create a gap or tension between the signifier and the signified which becomes the subject for the ethnic writer.

To re-establish a narrative and emotional coherence, a re-telling of stories and myths must take place which serves as a healing agent to those who have experienced the "gap" in their lives (Kroetsch 68-69). Mediating between tradition and modernism, home and exile, Jewish-Canadian and Italian-Canadian particularism and universal significance, there is a great deal of healing required for the female ethnic writer to feel whole and successful in Canada.

In order to fully comprehend the nature of the healing process, the linguistic history of the ethnic writer should be known. Monique Bosco's linguistic background is somewhat complex. She was born in Vienna and having lived there until age 4, was surrounded by the sounds of a German household. Moving to Paris as a young child, she was raised by her grandmother, who spoke French (although not very well), German, and Yiddish. As a young child in Paris, mocked by her French peers, she abandoned her mother tongue, German, and quickly adopted the French language. Her vehicular and

referential languages were primarily French, with the addition of English upon emigrating to Canada at 21 years of age. Her mythic language is Hebrew, the language of her ancestors.

Mary Melfi emigrated to Canada from Italy at 6 years of age. Her vernacular language is Campobassan, an Italian dialect which she is reticent to speak even in her familial environment; her vehicular langauge is English; her referential languages are Italian, French, and English; and her mythic languages are dialect and Italian.[7] Melfi's referential languages (Italian) find their way into her writing in the form of titles, quotations, exclamations, and short remarks, for example, "cafone," "Italia mia" (Melfi 1991, 135,75). Melfi's language is polyphonic, concentrating on Italian and English with occasional references to other voices. Dasenbrock states: "to make it [a text] unintelligible is not to make it unmeaningful: the use of opaque foreign words can be part of a deliberate artistic strategy" (Dasenbrock cited in Molnar 110). One response to Melfi's experience of cultural and social alienation, is the isolation of an Italian word among English words to duplicate her confused identity in language, to set distance from her reader, and to express difference (Verdicchio 1990i, 119). In effect, the writer's cross-cultural imagination creates a linguistic polyphony which mirrors her confusion of identity.

Conscious of the confusion inherent in their ethnic status in Quebec, Mary Melfi's protagonist, Nina Di Fiore, in Infertility Rites and Monique Bosco's protagonist, Hélène, in La femme de Loth articulate long laments of failure using a confessional mode. The novels, both written in the first person, are impassioned autobiographies of two souls in which

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[7] Although Gobard assigns the dialect to the vernacular language only, I am going to argue that both the Italian standard language and the dialect play off each other in representing the mythic language.

the protagonists in a process of accusation, absolution, and confession, lay bare their innermost being for the reader.

These two journeys of self-identification will be explored in three sections. Firstly, an examination of Melfi's Infertility Rites will focus on the protagonist's difficulty in dealing with her infertility and the subsequent problems she must face arising from her failure to conceive. Secondly, I will analyze Bosco's La femme de Loth, wherein Bosco utilizes a duplicitous character role for her protagonist in order to highlight the protagonist's failure to succeed in relationships with both her family and her lovers. Finally, I will compare and contrast these two novels to demonstrate how both Bosco and Melfi through their ethnic women protagonists are able to come to terms with their confused identities and achieve a sense of success and healing.

A. Infertility as metaphor

Originally conceived as a diary, Melfi's novel links the cultural alienation of her Italian-Canadian protagonist, Nina Di Fiore, to her personal crisis of identity as a woman battling infertility. Nina is a feminist artist who has turned away from her Italian background by both marrying a Québécois university professor and by choosing not to bear children. As an artist and feminist, she values her independence and creativity too much to sacrifice her liberty in the guise of a traditional Italian family. Although she has not achieved any success in the world of art, being unable to sell any of her works of art, she holds down a part-time job as a research assistant at The Institute of Social Policy. While her part time job provides enough money for her to pay for her art supplies, it is her husband Daniel who financially supports the household. At age 29, she appears to have happily ensconced herself in a contemporary Canadian environment, successfully leaving her Italian roots behind her. But, on the

first page of the novel, Melfi introduces the conflict that lies buried deep within Nina's soul: the desire to control her body, "to conceive, to get pregnant, to create new flesh and mercy" in order to "re-activate [her] energy supply and inspire" (5). Ironically, what Nina avoided as her duty, bearing children, she has now come to believe is her right.

Unable to share her feelings with either her mother or her husband, she secretly attempts to become pregnant and does, but miscarries early in her pregnancy. Melfi's use of irony in the novel, as Linda Hutcheon explains, allows her to demystify and expose her angst involved in (in)fertility, allowing her to break the link between the unrepresented *(her inability to conceive)* and the unrepresentable *(her pain and inner conflict of linking pregnancy to her Italian origins)* (30). Like Mary Melfi, Nina believes that failure is a big threat to one's ego, and is society's most recent taboo, something that we are not supposed to talk about (Cowans).

To defend her desire, and her biological need to reproduce, Nina allies herself with a "Swedish woman, a Mexican woman or anybody else," claiming that "[s]uch basic biological functions are not defined by one's country" (8). Unwilling to renounce her identity as a modern Canadian woman, she will not allow herself to believe that her maternal desire or infertility could be retribution for connecting with her Italian roots.

While Nina's expectation of her vocation was to be an artist and not an Italian mother, these two identities merge in her art when she creates canvases portraying surreal depictions of children. As a result of the confusion she feels "without any identity, artistic or otherwise" (121), it lends credence to her new found hope that a child will fill the void in her life that is her loss of identity. Ultimately, Nina's infertility becomes a motive for the physical and psychological separation from her husband, family, friends,

and colleagues--resulting in a form of exile or disappropriation (Pivato 1985ii, 173).

1. Cultural and familial alienation

Alienation from both one's family of birth and one's culture of origin is a theme that pervades Melfi's novel. Her protagonist traces her separation from both her Italian heritage and her family from birth, where she is made aware of the fact that "[b]oys were valuable additions to Italian families" whereas "girls were economic liabilities, uninsurable" (117). Nina expresses her negative perception of the value accorded to Italian females in her art as a small child. She remembers her fascination with the obscene, evil world which she rendered in her drawing, and her mother's superstitious incantations utilized "to remove the curse [of her evil art] by using a punitive pagan-christian ritual" (11). Thus at an early age, Nina senses a distance from her mother and her religious symbols, both fearful and jealous of their combined power over her mother's mind. Her isolation from her mother is further perpetuated by her mother's interpretation of Nina's Canadian-like personality traits: "zingara (gypsy)" and, worse yet, "putana (whore)--mother's interpretation of the North American in me" (12).

She and her mother are separated by language as well, in as much as Nina is unable to speak her native dialect very well, and her mother has yet to learn English. "I cannot talk with my mother, it would be a mistake, an insult to the old ways. Out of respect I am supposed to remain silent" (167). She finds refuge in English (a foreign language) and thus experiences exile from her maternal language and culture. Thus her English expresses the language of exile, and the vernacular or maternal language becomes the language of refuge, of nostalgia, of the past (Major cited in Harel 11).

Recognizing the silence inherent in their relationship, her mother lavishes expensive gifts upon Nina to make up for the lack of communication between them. Thus silence, the loss of dialogue with her maternal language, is connected to the distance and animosity which Nina feels characterizes her relationship with her mother. As Fulvio Caccia notes: "Language of Eden, language of Return in the manner of Hebrew for the Jews, Italian has provoked contradictory feelings of hate, love, and indifference" (Caccia 1985i, 159).

Unable to communicate with her mother, language comes to symbolize Nina's altered identity. The process of alienation that Nina undergoes with her mother through language is summarized as follows: firstly, beginning with the assertion of the failure of the vernacular, the mark of ethnic difference and lack; and secondly, its recuperability often signified by the search for a lost parent which is only possible in the symbolic order from which the vernacular is excluded, silenced or garbled (Blodgett 22). Recognizing she cannot participate in her mother's traditional world, Nina looks upon marriage as an ally to reintegrate her identity ("I always play by her old rules" (58).); thus her marriage and entry into the English-Canadian domain, the language and culture of exile.

Nina's confusion of identity is not diminished however by marriage: her and her husband's differences far outweigh their similarities. The lack of support provided to Nina is not so subtly emphasized by their difference of ethnic origin: being an intellectual and art historian of Québécois parentage, Daniel can no more accommodate his wife's sense of belonging in Montreal than can her mother. In a heated argument over the nationality of The Group of Seven painters, Daniel rebukes Nina: "You don't know what you're talking about. You're an immigrant. You can't appreciate what it means to have your own country.... I don't expect you to know our history. You're not one of us" (38).

This "lack" in Nina on a referential level is further exacerbated by the diversity of thought inherent in their gender difference. Upon discovering that Nina nurtures a maternal instinct akin to her mother's, and has further attempted to become pregnant, Daniel laughs at her, degrading her desire and reinforcing her sense of exile: "When I married you, you were an exemplary WASP. Even my mother commented on your successful integration into civilized society. It's recently you started to act like an Italian fishwife" (32).

When the issues of children and maternity arise for a second time, Daniel becomes verbally abusive toward Nina. Once he has accepted the idea of being a father, he begins to blame Nina for her infertility. This ironic twist reinforces her feelings of abandonment by her husband; she becomes fearful that he will leave her because of her being unable to conceive his baby. Her fear is compounded because her infertility also becomes an additional reason for inciting already frequent disputes, threatening matrimonial rupture. If Daniel is representative of all males in marriage, then Nina concludes "men [are] there to be an evil force" (121), the enemy.

Contrary to Nina's expectation, marriage to a Canadian male WASP has even more profoundly secured her status as an ethnic woman, bringing her no further ahead in her ability to fit all the pieces of her life together: "*Win by losing*. Marriage should not be an irreversible process towards power politics" (33). But the confusion of identity Nina experiences betrays her feminist politics as well, quietly elaborated upon by the absence of economic and sexual power held by Nina in the relationship: thus her personal realm must become one within which she takes control.

2. Reconstituting the self

Nina's angst is thus a result of her feelings of exclusion from Canadian and Italian culture: she cannot integrate as a feminist artist married to a Québécois and she is also excluded from the role of becoming the traditional Italian mother through procreation. Alone in her struggle for survival, and perceiving herself as victim, she therefore associates pregnancy with the building of her self-confidence and of the reconstructing of herself. "Like someone who aspires to create a new country out of an old one" (13), she holds up maternity as the solution of finding her place, of establishing her sense of belonging in an alien environment.

Perhaps Nina realizes the capacity of family as a haphazard, flimsy entity that has to be reconstituted and reimagined in every generation in order to sustain itself (Stone 40). In defence of her maternal instinct, she explains to Daniel that she feels:

> unconnected, unattended, unnoticed, undone by the pressures of pretending to be... somebody else. Me vs. we... Peewee looked out at the Atlantic Ocean from a big ship, scared by the spaces between countries; between identities. Now and then. Damaged (38).

With the memories of her childhood fuelling her quest to belong, and her alienation from the institution of marriage, Nina recognizes the need to begin her journey independently as both woman and immigrant. The journey to fertility is thus the vehicle by which the author examines Nina's reconstitution of self.

Placing the journey in the present psychological, religious, and medical milieu that is Nina's realm of experience, Melfi describes each of Nina's miscarriages in detail and her feelings of betrayal when her body fails to perform its female duty. The loss of control over the most fundamental aspect of herself, her reproductive birthright,

also means she must rely on others, including the medical profession, to make herself whole.

Thus Nina's journey is one that encounters numerous factual digressions by the author on fertility rates, genetic disorders, birth defects, teen-aged pregnancies, and obstacles to adoption, i.e., Melfi provides a complete cultural context within which Nina's quest is constituted. However, Melfi and Nina's focus on the medical profession and medical technology to solve her infertility demands that Nina separate her mind and body from the act of procreation.

Perceiving her body as the sacrificial lamb, Nina becomes terrorized by the idea of losing control of herself physically and emotionally (Salvatore 1994, 82). "The X-ray reduces my body," she declares, "my life to this one physical deformity" (118). As part of Nina's journey, the medical profession also forces her as an infertile woman to fit the technology available, in essence excluding her from constructing her personal story outside of the process. Thus her miscarriages transform her body into a foreign object for the perusal of a science over which she has no control. As Nina surmises, "The examination table is a sacrificial altar.... Medicine is a religion that makes no promises of life-everlasting, but it sure asks for a lot of faith in it" (83).

Melfi thus inscribes the body as woman's primary landscape that causes pain and self-doubt, and no doubt, infertility is a catalyst for the journey in which Nina must take action. But Nina's alienation as an immigrant becomes tragically apparent as does her existential crises as a woman, when for a third time, she fails to carry out her pregnancy to term (Salvatore 1994, 81). Filippo Salvatore explains Nina's crises:

> Nina Di Fiore lives connected to the Italianness of a second or third generation and between two social and existential realities. On the one hand, she imitates the role of the artist, a bourgeois feminist anglophone and career woman, and on the other hand, she inhabits the

> roles of the Italian female, feeling herself attracted by the traditional woman and the mother reincarnated by Dora, her 19 year old happily pregnant cousin, the ideal daughter that Nina should have been (Salvatore 1994, 81).

Through the accidental meeting at the gynaecologist's office with her cousin Dora, the mother reincarnate, and her Italian husband "bound by their common mother tongue and its traditions" (28), Nina realizes what else she lacks to feel whole: "I speak [Italian] with an accent [English]" (45). As Melfi so aptly demonstrates in her novel, Canada's two solitudes quietly tend to exclude the ethnic.

Thus during an important meeting at her workplace, the appropriately named Institute of Social Policy, Nina is supposed to be actively taking notes of a discussion on the "Post-Energy Crisis." Daydreaming, she reflects on her own personal crises: "I do not care about the country's problems. It is not my country. My country is my body and a revolution against it has taken place" (17). Note the double entendre, harkening upon Gilles Vignault's famous song of Québécois aspirations for its own country: "Mon pays ce n'est pas mon pays, c'est l'hiver." As such, Nina can only conclude that, "My present loyalty is to the god of exiles: Ambivalence. It ensures I can view my country... with a certain detachment" (24).

Her problem of infertility is not only a metaphor for the immigrant condition, but as Nina realizes, affects more than just her body: it forces her to live in exile in Montreal as well. "The miscarriage is symbolic of everything I have lost, that I wanted to have, expected to have but did not acquire in the course of my life" (61).

Seeking help to reconstitute her lost identity, Nina consults a female psychiatrist, Dr. Katz. But even Dr. Katz cannot appease Nina's state of anxiety with her use of "English words, English ideas, English civilization to teach me to respect myself and my abilities" (159). Like Daniel and her mother, the doctor's medical language is not

comprehensible to Nina. Not only is Nina's position one of marginalization and powerlessness in terms of her ethnicity, but also in terms of her biological capacity.

> My failure to get pregnant fills my whole life with Failure. Being fucked front and back by it. Failure's prick is hard and mean. Raped, except it is my own body doing it to me. I disassociate my body from myself; we are two separate entities. My body is the guilty partner (69).

As each miscarriage takes Nina deeper into a crisis of anxiety and depression, her traditional religious values begin to weigh on her as well. Her sense of failure is heightened by the Italian Catholicism of her childhood. Nina explains her loss of faith:

> In the old days I could turn to God and the Holy Mother Church, but not any more. Because as soon as I understood that what is bad to the Almighty Church (like masturbation, like birth control) is not necessarily bad in a moral sense nor bad in other religions, that are equally valid, I lost that youthful infatuation with authority. The Catholic Church's stupid rules imposed order on my life. But when I understood how unnecessary rules were to a moral existence (for surely God is more like a scientist and less like a dirty old man) then my belief in a system of justice (the bad are punished and good are not) came to an abrupt end--good and bad being impossible to define in absolute terms (158).

The denial of her religion parallels the nonacceptance of her ethnicity: "I am neither Canadian nor Italian, but a citizen of the underworld, trapped in its maze, where it is always badly lit" (48).

The Church functions as part of the patriarchal structure in many feminist texts, restricting the role of the sexes, especially women (Padolsky 1986, 141). Nina's recognition of the Church's role at a young age causes her to reject Catholicism and blame her parents for being "peasants who were used to feeling helpless" (69). By distancing herself from her parents and their Catholicism, she becomes a "spectator," able to displace her feelings of living in an exiled body. Nina comes to accept her spiritual journey of infertility as one

where "[o]ur soul gets rid of our body, a waste product, so that it can take over, and let us know a higher level of consciousness" (46).

Nina's personal oppression as the daughter of immigrants, a less-than-successful artist, a low wage earner dependant on her husband, and now infertile depicts the double-bind of femininity. Due to her physical and emotional condition, she has failed through lack of a common language to connect to anyone on a maternal, communal, or cultural level, and therefore can only find completion on a mythical and symbolic level: escaping through her imaginary.

Nina ends up by preparing herself for motherhood, as Infertility Rites closes in a fictional dialogue wherein Nina reveals she is successfully carrying a child (Salvatore 1994, 82). Nina hopes her "rite" of creation (in art and pregnancy) will complete her fragmented identity, "[c]ertain I can find the right colours to describe my state of emotional exile; confident the thousand islands I am living on are in my name; my inheritance" (180). Artistic recreation becomes her sole "language" of expression of her dreams and nightmares, allowing her to discover peaceful existence within her split worlds.

> Thank you, Great Spirit, for giving me the chance to do the natural thing, to follow my instincts--make love and conceive *au naturel*.... Projecting into the future tense--my baby taking its first steps, unattended. How wonderful to live outside the boundaries of my body cage. I will be a mother. Certain of it now.... Certain I will offer this regenerating bundle of humanity to the God of both Christians and heathens in thanksgiving.... Like a person with only a mild fever left after a long illness, I can start enjoying my body, my refuge, once again (181).

B. Relationship as metaphor

Although Infertility Rites concludes in Nina conceiving a healthy fetus, the reader is not certain as to whether this success will end her journey for self-authentification as both ethnic and woman in Canada. Monique Bosco's protagonist, Hélène, leaves the reader with a similar sense of ambiguity as to the success of her journey in La femme de Loth.

We meet Hélène, a 40 year old teacher of literature, soon after her lover Pierre has abandoned her, ending a ten year affair. He advises Hélène to spend her summer vacation in Venice to forget about him, which she does. There, Hélène decides to write her life story, hoping to understand her past in order to make sense of the present and future.

In taking on the endeavour of writing, she must explore her physical self, her relations with men, and her emigration to Canada. Like Melfi's protagonist, Hélène experiences a tridimensionality of "displacement" of being, in which the artistic body collides within a battle of the sexes, in turn experiencing an anthropological widening of traditions in confrontation with the new society (CF. Anselmi 15). This tridimensional displacement of being is well defined by Hélène's reflection: "Miroir, miroir, dis-moi que, pour lui, je suis celle qui compte" (240). The mirror provides the narrator with confirmation of her internalized identity, and doubles the relationships in her life's past. But Bosco's mirror distorts the tragic words of a life story told by a woman looking back, back to the failure of many of her past relationships that distance her from her present.

Hélène believes that she can only come to know herself and understand her pain reflected through these failures she has experienced in relation to others; she must uncover who she is as she writes the stories of the failed relationships which mark her identity. As a character, Hélène embodies the words of Robert Kroetsch: "In a sense we have no identity

until someone tells our story. The fiction makes us real" (Kroetsch cited in Mandel 1978, 266). That someone is none other than the protagonist herself.

Hélène's life is demarcated and related to us in five stages: her youth in France in the 1930s; her adolescence in Canada in the 1940s; her first experiences at the threshold of adult life in the 1950s; her failed marriage to Claude; and finally, in scenes that are inserted throughout the novel, her liaison with her lover Pierre. Here, the immigrant experience is one of a series of failed relationships and abandonment.

Literature, books, words, all act to transform her reality and flush the misery from her soul as she experiences her own metamorphosis from girl to woman. Hélène recognizes that her only means of "m'évader [était] grâce à l'étude" (211) which is through the act of writing. The protagonist is saved from banality because she exhumes with painful obsession a network of troubling symbols, that permeate through her Judaism, her femininity, her self-destructive sense, her maternal fixation, her obsession of the past, her refusal of the future and of all descendance, her clumsiness, her fear, her incapacity of making herself loved and be happy--all an inextricable jumble of complexes caught in the research of an issue, a long lament of failure (Escoumel 88-89).

Hélène's purpose in writing shifts constantly in an effort to pin down her life and death and trap the truth on paper like her favourite writers Racine and Baudelaire, an attempt to find some cause for hope and recovery to soften the truth and obliterate her pain, and an excuse to pass the time while she waits for word from her lover (Hargraves 37). Demonstrating that art does not imitate life, Hélène explains her purpose in La femme de Loth: "Je n'écris ce roman que pour éloigner l'échéance de la vérité" (42).

Hélène's long lament of failure deals with her self-image and the body like Nina's; it also incorporates her inability to experience love and happiness from others and for herself

throughout her life. Feeling invisible, she finds herself unable to connect with the world around her: friends, family, lovers, culture, or religion. The only link to her identity seems to be with the stories from a biblical past, of ancestors hidden from her. Reflecting upon the unhappy and impossible loves of a woman lost in the labyrinth of her youth, she finds herself empty and prematurely aged by an absence that she can not fill.

1. Abandonment

The novel begins and ends with Hélène contemplating her suicide in Venice. As she writes the first page of her story, Hélène discloses her thoughts of her solitude, the happiness of others, and her static state: "Il y a la fenêtre. Un bond. Et on échappe à l'horrible son d'une voix. Douce voix, soudain transformée en voix ennemie.... Dans ce dur pays de froid, les fenêtres ne s'ouvrent pas sur le vide" (7).

For a moment, Hélène experiences vertigo standing alongside her window sill, as if on the edge of an abyss. Remembering similar feelings she experienced as a child, she recounts: "Je restais près de la fenêtre à relire interminablement mes nouveaux livres. Je les savais déjà par coeur. Je n'osais regarder au sol, à cause du vertige" (56). The window separates Hélène from an internal reality filled with loss and pain, of her childhood, of her parents, of Claude and Pierre's rejection: it allows Hélène to define herself in purely negative terms.

This lack or absence does not permit Hélène the opportunity of meaningful human interaction, or of permanent bonds. Reflecting back on her life as a child of her parents, she comes to comprehend the fears and complexes that inhabit her as a woman alone at the age of forty. As she writes, she contemplates that even as a child she remained an outsider to her parents.

Her parents, once the idealized couple, were really too preoccupied with themselves to pay her much attention, even as a newborn: "J'ai raté mon entrée. Mon père et ma mère ne s'extasièrent pas sur mes charmes de nouveau-né.... Si peu conforme à leur image. En tout point dissemblable. Numéro désassorti. Ils étaient deux. Cela leur suffisait" (25). Trying to come to terms with feelings of abandonment by her parents, she can only remember how she fails to resemble them: "Et la même voix, ou une autre, différente, ou mille autres, réparties au long des années, reprenait en écho, sur leur passage: Le beau couple.... C'est fou comme ils se complètent" (26-27).

In Paris, trying to fit into her parent's world as a young girl, Hélène would go on outings with her parents and their friends. Disliking the silly games they played, and always feeling the odd person out, Hélène preferred the solitude of her books to the alienation she felt with her parents and their friends' children.

Redemption for her as a solitary child arrives when she enters school, where her appreciation of books and skills in reading are valued by her teachers. Being the teacher's pet, however, also alienates her from her fellow students, except for one other misfit she connects with, Nadine, with whom she can act-out and play her favourite female role model games, where she first learns to play the role of a women scorned.

From a religious perspective, Hélène is also an outsider. Reflecting Bosco's double involvement with religion, Hélène is half Jewish (on her mother's side) and half French Catholic (on her father's side and via her education), and never fully in either camp. Although she knows little of the Jewish faith, as her mother tried to hide her Jewish origins, Hélène feels pulled toward Judaism. Despite the fact that she is reared a Catholic, part of her stands outside that faith, critical and scornful of it. She comes to understand her Jewish identity,

"honteuse, reniée, cachée dans la nuit, rachetée par le grand jour de la claire conscience chrétienne" (130).

Hélène also echoes the author's sentiments of her own repulsion for the Catholic religion. Bosco recalls her baptism as an adolescent in Paris to be a traumatizing experience for her, as horrible as "cette entité baptisée Hélène et Claude" (146) (Claude being her husband who abuses her). Hélène is a woman without religion. It seems her only positive link to a religious culture or past is that which she holds through her physical and moral resemblance to her Jewish grandmother.

Upon meeting her grandmother as a young girl, her fatalism takes on a racial dimension: "J'eus le pressentiment d'une longue suite de chagrins accumulés, légués par elle, des temps anciens" (39). This is ultimately strengthened by the images with which she writes her grandmother's history: as a stranger who visited once a year, dressed in black, mourning her mother's marriage to her Catholic father.

As Hélène resembles her mother's mother, the link to her Jewish past extending from the Bible to the Holocaust cannot be denied, by her or her mother. As a child is perceived as a reincarnation of a grandparent, Hélène's mother takes all the feelings she has about her mother and transfers them, part and parcel, to her daughter in order to obliterate the memory of her mother. "En vain, ma mère avait voulu rompre cette chaîne [de chagrins]. J'avais rétabli le lien" (39).

Hélène's parents, fearing an impending war and rising anti-semitism, leave for Montreal in 1938. Her mother's wilful desire to abandon Judaism leads her parents to enrol her in a Catholic school upon arrival in Montreal. The act mirrors their creation of image: the bourgeois existence should be without roots or references to the world left behind.

But Hélène's Parisian accent distinguishes her from her classmates in Montreal, marking a self-consciousness that the author too shares with her character. At school however, she finds temporary peace in passive obedience and feels a "lien

très fort m'unissait à mes petites camarades. Nous communiions ensemble dans le mensonge nécessaire" (69). Together they read forbidden literature about passionate love and sex, subjects forbidden for discussion at school within earshot of the nuns.

Despite the pleasure that Hélène receives from her new found friends, she envies their self-confidence and their Québécois filiation, often feeling as if she is "une mauvaise voyageuse, ratant le paquebot pour la croisière rêvée" (149). These new friends and the cloistered environment allow her to disappear in dreams of belonging, yet she remains unlike them: Jewish roots, disdainful of her Catholicism, and very un-Québécois. For living in Canada "[d]ans ce dur pays de froid, [où] les fenêtres s'ouvrent pas sur le vide. Je ne t'échapperai pas" (7).

Playing the role of the young bourgeois daughter, Hélène is unconscious of World War II or the political problems existent in Quebec. For a short period in her life, she recalls connecting with her mother, through sharing an interest in her external images of teen fashion and diet.

Unfortunately, Hélène's parents leave her without any hope of attaining a meaningful relationship with either of them: their accidental death in the Laurentians while they are away on a holiday leaves her completely abandoned. Now an orphan, Hélène reads a grim justice in the absurd death of her parents: "Ils adoraient la vie," and they died young (95). Yet she, who hates life, experiences the guilt of not having died, of wishing that she could have been the victim instead of them.

As a survivor, Hélène has two temptations: speech or silence, silence "because what must be told is beyond the telling. Any account of the unrealizable is in some deep sense, a failure, a trivialization" (Mandel 1986, 7). This notion of separation from her parents and failure in her relationship with her parents continues to haunt her throughout her life: "Une tristesse infinie me pénétrait

devant ce monde en paix où je ne trouvais pas le repos" (98). It is time that allows Hélène to re-evaluate her relationship with her parents. While she recounts their story, her parents appear to have had a life like "un couple étincelant de contes de fées," but Hélène comes to realize that she has held their love up as a love of mythic proportions, "[l]a distance est toujours trompeuse," a love that is not surprisingly, unattainable in her other relationships (31).

After the death of her parents, Hélène moves in for her final year of high school with the family of her best friend, Danielle Guillaume. While there, Danielle's parents advise her that the best option available to her, owing to her limited funds, is to obtain a profession at University. Retreating into herself, she chooses to study literature instead, negating her parents and her adolescent concerns about her external image. There, she aligns herself with literary types, whose only connection to reality is through literature, and feeds herself on words. Unfortunately, her alienation from those around her is compounded as she loses her self amongst young adults forming couples, excluding the single Hélène. Even Danielle's parents' attempt "to fix her up" with eligible men fails to bring Hélène out of her solitude and within a couple.

This motif recurs throughout the novel, and is continually contrasted with Hélène's alienated existence. She is surrounded by couples who represent completeness to her: her parents being the ideal couple; the "pairing up" in university amongst her peers; and the marriages of her friends and lovers. This pattern of two being more complete than one extends back to the biblical archetype: "On accepte seulement les 'couples' comme dans l'Arche de Noé" (159).

Each of Hélène's attempts at being part of a couple ends in failure and forces her to play the dual role of both actor and spectator. First she experiences a relationship with Michel, a man who is training to become a priest who wants

Hélène for her soul, and uses her body for the sacrilegious pleasure his future will forbid him. To please him, she must play the role of a woman purging her soul of the sin, resultant from having shunned her Catholic beliefs and failing to take communion.

She then encounters Claude, a homosexual, who requires Hélène's body as wife and mother to sustain his closeted existence. Her marriage to Claude prevents her from achieving any sense of fulfilment, causing her to play her doubling role. "Il incarnait un rôle. Volontairement, je donnais ma réplique dans cette mauvaise pièce de boulevard" (144).

Finally, she spends ten years involved with a married doctor, Pierre, who wants to use up her body and soul in an illegitimate relationship until he decides he has had enough. To please Pierre, she must cast herself as the mysterious and enticing femme fatale, never behaving as if she is dependent on his affection.

It is not surprising that at the end of each involvement with these men Hélène finds herself more alone in the world of couples. Feeling like a deadened masochist in each of her relationships, in looking out her window at her past she sees herself growing more separate from any community, seemingly unable to replace her harsh reality with an imaginary one: "J'ai passé des années à faire du lèchevitrine aux étalages du bonheur conjugal. L'Amérique entière affichait ses richesses aux fenêtres panoramiques de toutes les belles banlieues peuplées de couples amoureux. Il me convient de pleurer sur mon ersatz de rêve d'arrière-cour" (240-241). Thus her only escape from her isolation is to look back at her ancestral past, her biblical past, to assuage her pain through an imaginary substitution.

Exhausting her failures in her relationships, she thus moves in to her referential and mythical imaginary, writing her past, as Nina also does via her painting. By looking behind her, Hélène focuses on the act of creating an image of

herself that does not include Pierre. This looking back is of the type of "passé-présent, présent-passé" similar to Ionesco: there is a continual alternation between the recent past that is the break-up of Pierre and Hélène, and the past which is always present. This past is the driving force from her youth to maturity, harbouring repeated failures which don't always explain why this woman "qui avait tant envie d'aimer, n'a guère été aimée" (Duciaume 52).

The utilization of the myth of Lot's wife is essential to the entirety of the work. Quoting from Jung, Gloria Escoumel notes:

> Cette farce s'approche du monde en détournant le visage, comme la femme de Loth regardant en arrière vers Sodome et Gomorrhe. Et pendant ce temps, le monde et la vie passent devant elle comme un rêve, comme une source importune d'illusions, de déceptions et d'irritations qui ne reposent sur rien d'autre que sur son refus de se laisser amener à regarder une bonne fois les choses en face (Escoumel 89).

These Jungian passages seem appropriate for the character of Hélène, who, like Lot's wife, represents the search for self and identity of all women. Hélène, seeing her past in terms of failure, appeals to death as the only possible future and disavows the warning of looking back. Hélène, as a "latter-day wife of Lot", tries to define herself separate from Pierre by looking into the unknown future rather than a failed past (Greenstein 1983, 51).

> En laissant la ville en flammes se consumer. Sans se retourner.... Il faut aller de l'avant. Sans un regard pour le passé. Pourtant quand Yahvé voulut sauver Loth, il l'autorisa à partir avec sa femme, ses filles. Et malgré la présence de Loth, le réconfort des enfants nées de sa chair, elle se retourne, malgré la défense formelle, la vieille femme folle regrettant ce qui a été (21).

Not having created a child with Pierre, Hélène looks back at her past life with him as cursed. For childlessness from a Jewish point of view is seen as "both a curse and a divine punishment," where punishment is to be cut off from the

family, or an early death (Goldstein 40). For Hélène, already cut off from her family, her only alternative is death, suicide. These memories of her personal past and her archetypal past become confused in her mind. In her desire for a less painful future she states: "J'aimerais comprendre pourquoi Dieu voulut sauver Loth et sa famille s'ils ne retournaient pas sur la ville en flammes. Je comprends si aisément la femme de Loth" (65).

Hélène understands Lot's wife, although she questions God's decision of saving Lot and his family. Here, as throughout the novel, Bosco's prose alternates between the symbolic Hélène and the narrator's present predicament: "Moi aussi, à la fin de cet été, je me serai peut-être transformée --à force de répandre des larmes sur le passé--en une autre statue de sel" (65). It is Hélène's reflections on her past, haunted by her many selves and doubles that crystallize in the myth of Lot's wife: Hélène Pierre's lover; Hélène Claude's wife; Hélène Michel's confessee; Hélène unloved daughter; Hélène Lot's wife:

> Loth et sa famille. Les filles sont jeunes, avec l'avenir devant elles. Pour la vieille femme, c'est tout son passé qui s'engloutit. Alors elle tourne la tête, cherchant à distinguer ce qui se passe, ce qui s'est passé. Elle se retourne, malgré la défense expresse. Pauvre vieille femme. Dans la Bible, tu n'as pas de nom. La femme de Loth, cela suffit.... Une statue de sel. La belle image. L'admirable symbole. Une statue de larmes pétrifiées.... Je me retourne, moi aussi, sur ce passé dévasté (268-269).

Abandoned by the world, Hélène commits the fault of the biblical character: instead of looking ahead and trying to invent a tolerable future, she returns toward her destroyed past as in the myth, awaiting a suicide she believes will finally free her. As Rebecca Goldstein explains:

> Irit [Lot's wife] looked back to see if her two first-born daughters were following, and she saw that they weren't and what had become of them. In such a moment of grief one knows only one desire: to follow after one's child, to experience what she's experienced, to be one

> with her in every aspect of suffering. Only to be one with her. And it was for this desire that Irit was turned into a pillar of salt. She was turned into salt either because God couldn't forgive her this desire... or because He could (Goldstein 41).

Bosco's Hélène, like Lot's wife, refuses to obey the word of God unconditionally. Herein lies the shared conflict of Lot's wife and Hélène: their failures, denied and repressed, require a transcendent act, a looking back, in order to reconnect to a state of grace that is the future (Goldstein 38-39). This tension thus affects their ability to distinguish between living in the past and in the future: "Vieillarde prématurée. Fausse jeune fille prolongée. Voilà mes deux faces" (180). Thus Hélène sees her fate resting on an abyss between the past and the future: "Je serai double jusqu'à la fin. J'hésite entre l'amour et la haine. L'Ancien et le Nouveau Testament. Parjure aux deux" (263). Hélène is aware of her duplicitous role throughout the novel that unites her with her biblical archetype: "cette farce que je répétais" et "mon simulacre de rôle." "Le passé est passé. J'ai tort de m'acharner envers ce double d'autrefois, ma soeur d'hier.... On ne se refait pas" (145). "Re-view," "re-turn," "re-peat," these words symbolize a pull to the past that prohibits future progress; the "re" prefixes meaning "back" and "again" focus on forms of doubling in the novel (Greenstein 1983, 52).

To prevent herself from turning into a pillar of salt, Hélène moves on to reexamine her previous relationships through the literature of authors, philosophers, and playwrights, including Proust, Kafka, Dostoevski, Sartre, and de Beauvoir, in the hope of creating a potential future. Explaining her passion for literature to her students, Hélène states: "quand je serai très sage, très vieille, je retournerai à Kafka, à Dostoïevski, sans avoir peur d'y retrouver le reflet de mes angoisses" (153). Her anxiety is largely played out as a classical tragedy, as its grandness of action fits the novel as a means of examination:

> La tragédie peut commencer. On sait d'avance que cela finira dans le sang, les larmes. A la fin du cinquième acte. Dans les vingt-quatre heures réglementaires. Qu'en un lieu, en un jour, un seul fait accompli.... Tout s'est joué ainsi, entre nous. Mais tu m'as fait attendre dix ans le dénouement (226).

Thus Hélène's continuous monologues--theatricalised in a thin veil of tears, words, silence, craziness, and death--are spoken by heroines extolling their lives as tragediennes.

It is Bosco's use of intertextuality, immersed in her truncated phrases, which reflects the state of mind of her protagonist: seeking to understand, through "looking backward" and by sharing her grief, pain, and sense of failure with others who have known the same kind of torment that she has known. Hélène's duality is thus resolved in the structure of myth, of a fictional heroine restructuring self in the company of other fictional heroines. To emphasize the link, Bosco also uses female victims of the Bible, from Greek tragedy and characters of children's tales (157,258).

At the same time, Hélène's stories are retaken and told as infinite variations upon her own past. The blasphemous complaints, accusations, and insults of the "other" are merely a way of testifying to and lamenting it--Pierre, who is "las de cette 'double vie'. Tricheur" (17). Without any hope of being heard, silence then becomes the transforming ground from which she prepares her vengeance, that is if she has the courage: "Il faudrait retrouver la voix. Crier, se rouler à terre, trépigner. Hurler à l'injustice, à la spoliation" (237). But further into the scene of rupture, Hélène doesn't do anything, she is "raisonnable," "statue de larmes pétrifiées," and remains motionless (8,268). There is no longer only death, the last asylum, a prolonged silence or cry, the dream of suicide, there is only a loss of self.

The tragedy must finish on a personal level in the emptiness of a new solitude. But the tragedy, through the act of writing, also exalts the action of being human. Hélène is

invented in order to destroy herself. Despite her taste for annihilation, she wishes to be "[p]rête à m'accommoder de la moindre parcelle de vie à ma portée" (107-108). When she fails and renounces and there is no longer any time left, she knows however what it is necessary to do: "repartir, d'un pas ferme. En laissant la ville en flammes se consumer," without looking back (21). As she begins to understand her past, she assumes responsibility for her future and develops from passive victim into agent.

> Un jour, je sus lire.... Ce moment, ce passage à la vie de l'esprit.... Pourtant, de ce jour, ma vie fut transformée. Je n'étais plus seule.... Véritable métamorphose de ma condition (41-42).

The act of reading and writing allows her to carve out a semblance of reality in which she can safely exist within four walls independent of society:

> J'ai toujours été étonnée de voir mon ombre se profiler sur un mur, sur le sol. J'avais donc une ombre. Des empreintes digitales uniques au monde.... J'essaie de les nommer, de les cerner, sur ce papier.... En cessant d'exister, je ferai mon premier choix de vivante. Exit Hélène (147).

It is Hélène's walls of paper which render her invisible. "Mais, longtemps, cet écran de papier m'a servi d'alibi. J'ai vécu les vies fictives de bien des romans. J'ai évité de vivre la mienne" (73). Having reached 40, she questions her sense of self in her diary. She identifies her splitting image: her acting self is her dramatic role to be played out on herself and her recording or observing self, as she casts her shadow on a wall or words on a piece of paper (Greenstein 1983, 52).

In the end, she comes to the conclusion that writing acts as her saviour although it is no substitution for life, as the suffering of the past has been transmuted to lasting art, and therefore she decides not to commit suicide. "Pauvres pages. Preuve dérisoire qu'en fin de compte tout est littérature. La vie, l'amour, la mort. Simulacre et dérision" (281). Literature, biblical or other, is the measure against which

her life is lived. Bosco's Hélène has successfully, though somewhat parodically, deconstructed her identity.

C. Reconstituting identity

As authors Bosco and Melfi both incorporate many personal experiences in their protagonists' stories. Melfi, a self-avowed feminist writer, having written Infertility Rites at a time she was experiencing infertility, can identify with the pain of her protagonist, a struggling artist. Bosco, a successful writer, poet, and professor, creates a character Hélène, also a teacher of literature.

Once again, both Nina and Hélène, similar to Melfi and Bosco, are displaced persons, as Italian and Jew living in Canada, as women, and as uprooted people. The protagonists also feel unloved by their families, alienated from their environments, unable to belong to French society in Quebec, outsiders in the world itself. Being immigrants to Canada, Melfi and Bosco portray the outsider perspective in their novels to examine the question, "where do these people belong?" As Nicole Brossard states: "I say that writing begins here, between what's real and what's fictive" (Neuman and Stephenson 15).

Both authors, having spent a great deal of their childhood in refuge, Bosco in the war and Melfi in her aunt's house as a new immigrant to Canada, know isolation as children, as immigrants, and as adult writers. Both protagonists, like their authors, bear the burden that accompanies the life of the artist: of alienation, rejection, and solitude.

In the act of naming their characters, Melfi and Bosco foreshadow their protagonists' failure in achieving a sense of self. "Nina, my one and only name; my personal no-name brand of names, maiden-like" (142). Like Nina, Hélène's name is not given much significance. "Ils m'appelèrent Hélène. J'ai dû

noircir tout ce papier, avant de l'avouer.... Des tas de filles ont des noms qui ne leur vont pas" (147-148). Finding the act of naming troubling (which she attributes to the Jewish side of her personality), Bosco does not make Hélène's name known until the middle of the novel. And like Lot's wife, Hélène only has a first name, no last name.[8] Both Melfi and Bosco's protagonists fail in the myth of "making a name for themselves," as they never succeed in their art or literary worlds. This inability to succeed is characterized by a lack of success in other areas of their lives: their lack of acceptance in society as ethnic women, a chief representation of their failure. Simon Harel explains the representation of the ethnic as an outsider from within the Quebec tradition:

> Ces écritures posent un défi à la fiction québécoise: elles lui demandent d'abandonner cette carapace protectrice qui constitue la "représentation" de l'étranger. Elles suscitent des interrogations quant à une littérature québécoise qui ne s'accrocherait plus au désir de préserver un sens premier, ce qui permettrait en retour d'abandonner la saisie spéculative de l'étranger au profit de l'écriture d'une étrangeté dans la langue (Harel 1989, 32).

Harel's statements makes it appear as if there is no place for the ethnic, especially ethnic woman, except in the margins of Québécois society. As such, both protagonists feel separate from a sense of place, unwelcome, as if they exist within an enemy camp, referring to themselves as "missing persons" and "victims" of their malfunctioning bodies, place, and histories.

As outsiders they are also powerless, positioned in relation to others as victims. And as victims, those who hold power over them justify the pain they inflict on Nina and Hélène regardless of the outcome. As Nina relates her painful

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[8] From an interview with Monique Bosco and Debra Muchnik, August 1994. To name characters is like a religious taboo which has caused Bosco pain to transgress. Naming children after deceased loved ones is a Jewish Ashkenazic tradition.

experience in the fertility clinic: "Relax, orders the doctor, raping me with his medical instruments" (109). The violation of the medical instruments justifies the pain of her failure to conceive. Perhaps it is the religious backgrounds of the writers, Catholic and Jewish, that can view suffering as a vital force to overcome the status of outsider.

For Hélène, suffering, in the guise of abandonment and solitude, weighs heavily throughout her quest. Never able to truly capture the love and attention of her parents, she then is forced to cope with their accidental death. Their absence and her journey of reconstitution confronts her with a series of men--Michel, Claude, and Pierre--all of whom inflict pain upon her, body and soul, each believing they act in good faith under the false pretences of providing her with spiritual redemption, partnership, or love.

Perhaps as outsiders, Nina and Hélène in their search for identity require they define themselves in terms of what they lack, what they are not. Nina's jaded perception of self strikes at the image of conformity:

> she is not the siren her husband desires, she is not a mother like her cousin Dora, she is not the industrious daughter her mother hoped for. "Dr. Bergman: The type of girl mother always wanted me to be like--sitting in her own office with her own phone, with her own secretary, with her own name plate, participating in helping humanity and, through it, enjoying the spoils of war (an upper-middle class income)" (Danford 24).

The notion of lack is indicated most directly in the double entendre that is the title of Melfi's story, Infertility Rites. Nina does not search for love from those around her as does Hélène, who feels her sense of lacking can be replenished through the love of others. For Nina "It is inspiration I want... capturing the grotesque" (22). She confronts the grotesque in life as in art, in an assault on her body to render her fertile and whole, all the while transforming this image onto her canvases.

In search of absent love and inspiration, Hélène and Nina utilize other modes and symbols to diminish the lack in their lives. Both protagonists like many women use food, which they associate with the female side of their heritage, to try and make up for their cultural lack. Nina identifies the food that her mother prepares for Christmas with her Italian roots, always referring to food items by their familiar Italian name, and linking this food association to her female ancestors. Her grandmother is described as an "edible Italian culture inciting patriotism and good-will" (131).

Food is often the only positive image of the ethnic's heritage, which, as a symbol, is also embodied in memories of the protagonists' grandmothers. In both novels, the food of their grandmothers provides a connection for the protagonists to their heritage. Like Hélène's mother, food is the material that Nina's mother employs to obliterate her past: World War II, famine in her home town, the death of her sister of pneumonia and malnutrition.

While both Jews and Italians place a great deal of importance on the traditions of eating, Bosco and Melfi utilize this cultural symbol quite differently in their stories. Although Nina's only celebration of her Italian heritage comes through her mother's cooking, Hélène scorns her parents' desire to overfeed her, in an attempt to gain control over her connection to Jewish tradition. As Julia Kristeva explains: "the mother links food, meaning and language, the entry into the symbolic and the laws which give meaning to social negotiations" (Gunew 1993ii, 16). Eating the food of their cultures does not compensate for Nina and Hélène's lack: food, instead of nurturing, comes to symbolize death, a breach in the link to their cultural past.

Hélène's life (and its lack) is also defined symbolically through a series of negative human interactions that deny the possibility of relationship. Forced to play with her parents' friends' children, she found that "il fallait feindre de

s'amuser" because when she was with them, "je me sentais jugée, passée au crible... impitoyablement rejetée" (29).

Her childhood, like Nina's, is characterized by a lack of communication, isolation, and petty humiliation, in which her only means of securing identity is by leaving the remnants of her dysfunctional family via marriage or university. As Hélène states, a university education means: "J'y avais ma place.... Dans l'ensemble, elles m'acceptaient" (44).

But her sense of acceptance is short lived in university, as she recognizes that she continues to play the role she appropriated as a small child, "les seconds rôles de femme sacrifiée et bafouée, gentille mais faible" (46). Similar to Nina's inability to communicate with her mother, Hélène inhabits "les seuls refus imaginables [qui] s'effectuaient dans le silence" (53). Elizabeth Stone explains that the destructive pattern of creating assigned roles within the family unit are harmful in as much as they are negative roles which silence them and which continue to bind them through adulthood:

> In every family, say family theorists, individual members have their assigned roles, not determined by who the players really are, but who the family as a whole needs them to be. Destructive "family myths" as defined by Antonio Ferreira, as "beliefs shared by all family members, concerning each other and their mutual position in the family life...." He asserted that these beliefs go unchallenged by everyone involved in spite of the reality distortions which they may conspicuously imply (Ferreira cited in Stone 102).

Although these "family myths" explain the roles adopted by individuals in the family, these myths conceal their motives to preserve family equilibrium.

In Hélène's failure to achieve the Canadian image of happiness (an equilibrium) by realizing the immigrant's dream, she can neither reconcile herself to her family, which is her past, nor adjust to the present. So her relationship with both parents is fraught with emotional turbulence. Like Nina, she remains an outsider to her parents, unable to broach the

distance between "Adam et Eve," the ideal couple, and the abandoned child. They were "ce couple de cygnes" of whom "le canard noir," third of a false Trinity is excluded from the symbolic (31). Hélène's sense of alienation is reinforced when she asks her parents for a baby brother: "Il y a les maladresses qu'on ne peut répéter" (26).

Hélène's lack is also symbolized by the Catholic training she receives as an adolescent, unwanted or respected, and contrasted with her struggle to reconnect with the silence of her Jewish past. Her failure to connect is further concretized by her sense of guilt upon learning of Nazi atrocities against Jews, and her sense of isolation amongst her Catholic peers.

As the historian Robert Harney notes, the immigrant sense of "self-disesteem," as experienced by Hélène (and Nina), comes about when one views oneself as inferior which is reinforced by prejudices of majority society. As Pivato notes, this prejudice is very much a part of the Catholic education system due to its emphasis upon self-denial, self-deprecation, and humility (Pivato 1990ii, 30).

By the end of both novels, Nina and Hélène come to understand that much of their family's image is false. Their quest is as much a process of unravelling the concealed images to themselves as to the outside world. Similar to Nina's acknowledgement of her pregnancy, Hélène exclaims: "Je me sens si 'juive' aujourd'hui. Le Dieu de mes aïeuls maternels se venge" (262). These are the feelings of a woman who has been abandoned and who has now found empowerment by knowledge and control over her life's future.

Succeeding in their quest, as symbolized by Hélène's control over her emotional wrangle with her past relationships, and Nina's successful pregnancy, both protagonists can now develop the character traits they share with their mothers: authority, self-respect, and self-control (Verduyn 43). Their quest is thus a pursuit of self-knowledge characterized by a rejection and acceptance of their mothers

and themselves. As such, their quest is very much attached to a feminist mythological subcode: the search for the Great Mother, submerged in the patriarchal culture that keeps her presence alien to her daughters (Sciff-Zamaro 1985, 81).

Sciff-Zamaro concludes that through recovery and acceptance, ethnic women such as Nina and Hélène find their own identities, recovering their mother, mother-land, mother goddess, their Great Mother. Uniting with their mothers, they have made peace with their past, recovering their mothers and origins as positive powers (Sciff-Zamaro 1985, 98). As Elizabeth Stone notes, to make our own meanings out of our (family) stories is to achieve balance--to be part and apart from our family's way of holding on and letting go (Stone 244). In so doing, both protagonists achieve a sense of wholeness, in recasting the path of the failed daughter and wife and mother, upon whom is imposed a state of powerlessness and alienation that forces them to exist outside their bodies, spirits, and cultures.

However, to experience redemption and wholeness, Hélène and Nina must also transform themselves. For Nina, fertility is the key and "medical tests" will serve to guide her through her "[r]ites of passage" (107). Hélène echoes this view of maternity as being: "la seule oeuvre qui compte pour une femme," but her desire is to have a child in the image of a loved man, hoping to reconstitute a relationship ideal she has never known (250).

In contrast to the life force of birth, at various moments throughout their journeys, Hélène and Nina feel that escape through death is the only possible resolution to their lack. Here, the immigrant experience becomes symbolic of the life and death struggle of an entire culture: a struggle between death and perpetual marginalization, total assimilation, silence, indifference, or invisibility (Micone cited in Amprimoz and Viselli 118).

Nina's nightmares portray the turbulence that is going on inside of her: "Some days I believe that the train I am on is actually heading for a concentration camp but, more often than not, the vehicle is motionless" (156). Although she senses that she is heading toward death, she is also trying to run from its path, and like Hélène, she cannot rid herself of her recurrent thoughts of suicide. For Nina, "[s]uicide is an idea --an escape" (156). While waiting to hear the results of her amniocentesis and to discover whether she will have a chance at completing her pregnancy, she contemplates her death:

> Work-in-progress. Suicide, the flag of peace; the flag of a defeated country; suicide, a nazi flag, an un-christian symbol. Suicide, the pirate ready to kill for that pot of gold: freedom. Suicide, my pay check for being unable to work out a scheme for myself in this chaotic world; suicide, the bonus I receive for being a pauper, dependent on other people's good will. Suicide, the promotion from the dead to the real dead. Suicide: the ultimate adventure for the rich and the poor. J.C. claimed the poor bring their soul into the next world, and the rich might not. Will I? Will you (164)?

Similar to Nina, Hélène feels that although she did not choose her life, she has chosen her time and place of death, "[j]e suis l'artisan de ma destruction," in the comfortable surroundings of Venice: "Le coin des étrangers que la mort à surpris.... Il fera beau dormir dans ce fief des apatrides de la religion et de l'amour" (242,279). As she prepares the final pages of her text before drifting off to her death in a Venetian lagoon, a character of Raymond Queneau reminds her that her literature is merely a parody of "la vie, l'amour, la mort."

But Hélène and Nina both find solace in other worlds of artistic expression before they can commit their final acts of destruction. "I turn on the television, a medium that often helps me escape into the world I prefer to live in: other people's" (Melfi 1991, 40). Or as Hélène states: "Je retrouver cette stimulation du travail, le goût d'en apprendre davantage, la curiosité, le désir de m'exprimer.... L'esprit

en paix, à l'aise, dans ma peau.... Je n'attendais plus rien de l'extérieur. Ni amour ni amitié. J'étais contente. Dans le present" (223-224). They have discovered contentment that they do not know in their present.

That security is in their art, and its saving function is within the process of self-discovery. Discovering asylum in their art, both protagonists realize that although art does not imitate reality, it can reflect life's experiences, as both a window, double, and mirror. Ultimately as characters, and as the creators of their own works of art, they come to realize that as ethnic women, they need to appropriate and ultimately share their art and stories as they write and represent them.

Yet as tellers of their own stories, both Nina and Hélène set an emotional distance to protect themselves from the reality that is the illusion of their art, as if to deny the stories that are buried within their psyches. We see this process of denial with Nina who, at first, is only able to express her pain on her canvases through the surreal grotesque paintings of children. Later she realizes that she is part of a tribe of women who all suffer from the fear of failure and the need to express it. This idea is elaborated on by Nina at her best friend's house-warming party:

> my story gives them a chance to remember their own, which was otherwise hidden, tucked away, until someone pulled the trigger: memory. We are a family of sorts, collectors of stories, of philosophies on life and death, made intimate by our apolitical histories (94).

But it is through the act of reading, writing, and painting their stories that the protagonists are able to transform their failure to success. Realizing that the internal world of literature (and art) can separate them from their external reality, Hélène (and Nina's) artistic expression represents their power.

By creating their own fairy tales or family explanation myths, the authors are able to deal in code with the important

human issues of birth, death, sexuality, injury, and insanity (Stone 99). Thus both authors characterize the family by the dichotomy of the "afflicted" and the "survivors." And backward glances at one's failures are forbidden, as Lot's wife learns and as Nina's mother reminds her of the "Italian motto: Never look back" (72). Utilizing this code, both protagonists are able to recreate their identities within their journeys to locate and come to terms with their "intersecting" identities, by dealing with failure, by looking back.

Through artistic recreation, the authors blur their reality and the reality of the ethnic woman by creating their fictional accounts in order to prevent the disappearance and silence of the ethnic woman. Despite the intensely personal, introspective character of these confessional memoirs, La femme de Loth and Infertility Rites gradually broaden to become the portrait of a generation of ethnic women.

CHAPTER TWO

III. THE JOURNEY TO POWER: WRITING THE SELF

> By writing her self, women will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display--the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions. Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time.
> Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth.... To write. An act which will not only "realize" the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being; giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal....(Cixous 250)

Canadian ethnic women writers feel the burden of patriarchy, aware of the censored voice of ethnic women that is theirs. As Mary di Michele states, women ethnic writers are "doubly split from the language itself: because it is not their own; because they are women and writing in the langauge of the patriarchy... because they are from ethnic minorities and not fluent in the official language" (di Michele 1991, 17).

According to di Michele, men and women do not have equal access to language: women are excluded from the public sphere, the dominant male language and are relegated to the domestic or private sphere, searching for their own alternative language. In order to express themselves, women writers must adopt a "language of desire" which is the "language of women, of ethnics, the "language of disenfranchisement and the language of difference"... language that "must be appropriated" by the writer (di Michele 1991, 14). In so doing feminist ethnic writers make legible what is legitimate, uncovering hidden practices of exclusion in the dominant

discourse, since not all discourses are included in the legible and legitimate (Paré 144).

This sense of otherness, of exclusion, alienation and powerlessness, has led writers to use a variety of subversive tactics to create an inclusive discourse of power. One such tactic, according to Linda Hutcheon, is the "authorial strategy of the trickster, purporting to tell one story and project one persona and actually implying another message, setting out to mediate but only pretend to do so" (Hutcheon 50).

This polyphonic use of language is the primary tactic employed by both Monique Bosco in La femme de Loth and Mary di Michele in Under My Skin, in the telling of their stories. In this chapter I will firstly, examine di Michele's use of her language of desire that reveals gender, family, culture, and religion as forces that prevent contemporary ethnic women from being heard. Secondly, I will examine how Bosco writes the self of her female character within a polyphonic feminist discourse in her protagonist's journey of alienation from her body, to self-knowledge and empowerment. In closing, I will compare and contrast how these two authors realize through writing their protagonists' bodies, the life force that enables their protagonists to achieve power and freedom from a discourse not of their writing.

A. Absence of power, absence of voice

Mary di Michele emigrated to Canada at the age of 6, arriving amidst a large wave of Italian immigration to the city of Toronto during the 1950s. While quite assimilated, she has managed to maintain her native dialect, her mother's tongue, a female and emotional language from her childhood. She recalls a childhood wherein her mother filled her childhood with stories culled from photoromance magazines, folktales, and anecdotes from her native Italy, providing her

with the fuel for her artistic expressions as poet, critic, and essayist (di Michele cited in Norris 7).

di Michele was uncomfortable in her body and felt insecure with her English until she was able to master the language as a young adult. She rejoices in the physicality of her adopted langauge, which allowed her to break from her ethnic past while simultaneously comprehending it. Her vehicular languages based on her educational and cultural pursuits in Canada are English, French, and Italian.

There is no doubt di Michele's feminist attitudes developed as a response to growing up in a household and culture that was very patriarchal. She viewed the limited roles of women from working class southern Italian backgrounds as oppressive, reinforced not only internally within the family, but externally by the Catholic Church. Both institutions she deemed authoritarian and repressive to her spiritual expression, and in rejecting them, turned to the English language and culture of Toronto as a means of achieving autonomy as a woman.

As noted above, di Michele is of the belief that by creating her own language of desire, one that speaks to ethnic women, she could appropriate the language of patriarchal culture and subvert it to her own ends. It is this refusal to accept the female condition as prescribed by the culture she grew up in, that di Michele rebels against in her writing.

In both di Michele's Under My Skin and Bosco's La femme de Loth, we find protagonists dependent on men, censored from their feminine sense of selves within the patriarchal text that they must rewrite. To counter their double sense of alienation and powerlessness, as noted, both authors adopt a polyphonic language to give a voice to the multiple internal desires of ethnic women. They also utilize the tactic of speaking in the first person, their "own voice". This functions to give their storytelling narratives an illusion of power and control over their characters' lives, giving their

characters access to many paths, including the "truth" (Gunew 1985, 165).

But in their search for the cause and location of their characters' self-destruction, the authors paint a grim picture of the ethnic experience that is theirs. Their characters become self-destructive in their attempts to escape the immigrant family and all things Italian and Jewish, by leaving home, rejecting their parents and deform their bodies through starvation, and internalizing their low valuation of their ethnicity and sexuality into their thought and behaviour. In short, they accept their powerlessness, portraying a graphic portrait of self-hatred (Pivato 1994, 215).

What di Michele and Bosco's protagonists "unmask" therefore, is the dominant language of self-destruction that makes many ethnic women strangers to themselves. This effect is revealed through a series of (dysfunctional) relationships each protagonist has with three male lovers, the apparent cause of their destruction. As such, their journey from a lack of knowledge and selfhood as women, to knowledge and power, is on a path that can either lead to the inferno or to paradise, a choice which is often not obvious when the language utilized is not their own (Palmer 95).

For example, many immigrant women in Italian-Canadian literature (as exemplified in the novels of Maria Ardizzi) perpetuate the stereotypes of the strong immigrant woman who suffers in silence. We expect ethnic women to be symbols of submissiveness for family, husband and culture (Donati Gun 141-142). Moreover, many writers neglect writing about professional and successful ethnic women, or the "not so nice girls" who tend to deviate from acceptable social norms.

di Michele breaks from this tradition in Under My Skin, a surreal novel that examines the power struggles between men and women amidst the dark side of contemporary sexual relations. She does this by utilizing a professionally successful female protagonist, Rita Latte, a film publicist,

within a multi-layered text of polyphonic language. The polyphony is contained within the novel in the guise of a novel written by Rita Latte: a novel she hopes to sell as a basis for her screenplay. To distinguish between the chorus of voices, we must first look to the structure of the text within which she implants these voices.

Rita Latte has a comfortable executive position as a film publicist. As part of her job, Rita organizes film premiere parties, where she mingles with the crowd. Unfortunately, the premiere she hosts in the novel's preface is an experience she finds both alienating and unfulfilling as a professional and as a feminist. As she states, she experiences "[l]aughter that makes you feel more isolated at a party than when you're alone at home. Laughter with a head but no body" (10).

di Michele thus signals the invisibility of the ethnic professional woman, one whose work existence is as cut up and compartmentalized as her home existence. Unable to connect with anyone at the party, even the bartender, Rita feels as if "I'm spending the whole time in my head" (11). The only means of surviving in the alien film world is through an internal withdrawal, a task Rita accomplishes by leaving her body and entering the thoughts in her mind.

After describing her outfit in detail, Rita waits for someone to notice her Natalie Wood ensemble: she is unwilling to "sacrifice looking good" for her feminist friends who abhor "fuck-me heels" (10). Needless to say, her heels come in handy when she bumps into her seductive, alluring male boss, "his six-plus-eminence...Peter the Great...dressed in a tuxedo with tails... a real "lady killer" (7-8). Rita figures this is her chance to broach the subject of her other talent, that of a feminist writer, to her boss. Although threatened by his masculine power, she musters up all her courage to ask him to read her recently created novel, "a feminist Crime and Punishment," which she hopes he would consider adapting for a film (13).

Utilizing her feminine mystique, she entices him with a glass of wine and a glimpse of her thigh into the sexual domain of fantasy where her power to persuade men seemingly resides. She wastes no time pitching her story idea to him about "a serial rapist who is a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde type character. And a heroine who is a young filmmaker" wherein "the viewer [is forced] to feel the violence in the genre" (13).

In sensing his response to her offer of yet another masterpiece from a woman subordinate to him, she humours him, playing down the art house nature aspect of the novel. He agrees to take home and read her novel overnight, insisting they will meet and discuss her work the next day over lunch: "If this story is as good as it looks, then I may be able to help you. Imagine, you can move out of that dingy little cubbyhole, your post, and into a more creative role" (15). Ultimately her boss hints at more than a trade off: he's going to go home and read her novel with the knowledge a sexual favor may be in the offing for him. Using her sexual power to encourage her boss to read her novel is not without irony: his evening's reading is the tale within the tale, a feminist nightmare of female sexual desire and male sexual abuse.

It is within the novel within the novel that di Michele intertwines two plot lines explicating the stories other texts: a women's novel of relationships combined with a psychological thriller about a serial rapist. The women's novel of relationships involves two separate women, one a successful professional filmmaker named Rita Chiddo, another a disturbed housewife, Lily, who is married to a doctor whom she does not realize is a rapist. The psychological thriller is told from the point of view of the doctor committing the rapes, Michael, via the journals he keeps of each rape.

The novel within the novel alternates chapters between its three subjects: Rita; Lily, the wife of the serial rapist doctor; and the serial rapist doctor, who writes a "Journal"

which constitutes his character as a subject. Utilizing this structure, which differs from the typical psychological thriller, di Michele tries to establish a "why-done-it" as opposed to the traditional "who-done-it."

1. A chorus of voices

di Michele limits the personal history and pasts of the characters she uses. We know that Rita Chiddo was an independent filmmaker for a number of years before transferring to a more financially secure position at a film company, like her author Rita Latte. When we meet her, she is the only female executive on the company's board of directors. However, having been overlooked for promotions numerous times by the men who control the film company, she has reached a point in her life where she begins to wonder if she can ever really make it in a man's world. Her feelings of oppression and silence are such that she feels marginalized on the board, "invisible as a person, but a target for sex, for shaming." What is represented is a woman, successful both financially and in her career, but plagued by having to sacrifice her feminist principles and dignity in order to enter the corporate patriarchal world.

The "Lily" chapters write the story of Lily Skelton, who is continually contrasted with Rita's character. Lily is an unhappily married Canadian woman who gave up a career as a university lecturer after falling in love with her student, Michael. She takes on the role of his submissive wife, and becomes a mother to two children, Ted and Sophia. Through the act of marriage, Lily transforms her identity as an autonomous female to a voiceless, dependant, female desperate for knowledge and acknowledgement.

Throughout Lily's chapters we see a troubled woman's inability to cope in a marital relationship devoid of emotion or communication with her husband. As woman, wife, and mother,

she symbolizes all of Rita's worst fears regarding marriage. Lily acknowledges that the familiarity of her marriage has "rendered her invisible to her husband" (45). She fights her invisibility with attempts to communicate with Michael, attempts which are generally ignored or rebuffed.

Refusing to give up hope, she perseveres in her role as dutiful wife, but Michael's pleasure in his silence, intermingled with his sarcasm and humiliation, drive her to despair. Silenced, she retreats to a world of pills and alcohol which offers her momentary respite. Like many women living in abusive relationships, Lily mistakenly believes that through the physicality of her husband, she can retrieve her lost soul. As a result, she spends her time searching for "the space where his body had just been, searching for traces of him, of something" to fill the void that is her life (51).

In "The Journal" chapters we come to know the dark personality of her husband, Michael Skelton, a serial rapist and doctor, who keeps detailed journals of every woman he assaults. The detached impersonal manner in which he writes conceals that fact that the "incidents" the doctor refers to are rapes. His attention to detail and his objective manner are of equal importance to him, as he notes:

> I kept the details [of every rape] on three-by-five file cards, wrapped simply in a rubber band, and stored in the glove compartment of my car. I filled in these cards immediately after every incident, sitting in my car in the garage, before going back into the house. They are reports, not diary entries. There is nothing personal or self-indulgent in them. Everything is empirically observed and noted. I abstained from all rationalizations. These cards may be useful in understanding my case. A case where I was completely in control, the proof in the minutiae and accuracy of my reporting (17).

di Michele incarnates all that is sexually pathological in a man in Michael: he takes pride in his successful career as rapist, marvelling upon his keen observation and memory, his self-control, and control over his environment (18). In

setting out to discover "why done it", di Michele portrays his thrill in rape as being derived from "the touching that comes naturally for a man with a woman, comes naturally when he doesn't have to worry about what's gentle, what's rough. When he doesn't have to think about pleasure, her pleasure" (21).

Thus he is able to consume himself in his own desire, regarding his victims' bodies as his sexual stage to perform upon. Contradictorily, he also craves to understand the female experience of rape, as he explains: "I would like to be more than a protagonist, yes, to be my own dramatist, yes to be both male and female" (39). In perceiving himself as acting out the dual roles of spectator and actor during his sexual assaults, he comes closer to his ultimate goal of being a modern renaissance man.

Feeling that his attacks represent a brand of enlightenment for the female victim, he envisions himself as "more than her mother and what I was about to offer her was far better than the gift of life. It was experience" (93). Michael's narcissism allows him to separate himself from humanity, especially from "the vacancy of women" of which his wife is included (127). He describes his first victim after the assault as if she were completely dissociated from the experience, "as if the body of the victim thrown out onto the road were not her own" (22). For di Michele, Michael views his victims as inanimate objects for experimentation, bodies without souls, imagining their experience so perversely he remarks upon how they enjoy his assaults "swooning, like a young girl for her first kiss" (22).

And with every first kiss, reading the fear in his victims' eyes, he chooses not to disappoint: the consummate medical professional leads his victims toward the edge of death, yet stops at the point where it is still within his power to resuscitate them:

> The deepest impressions were made by the thumbs, where they almost succeeded in breaking the neck; fragile as

> the chicken bones we crack to suck out the marrow, the juices. We crack.... Then I came back to revive her. I gave her a little water and some sleeping pills. Her body shook violently. Her teeth rattled like ivory dice.... With my blue and yellow, fine point Bic, as anonymous a tool for recording information as I know, I filled in a report. I created a new file for her:
> C. Hansen, Apt. 19, Euclid & College, August 4 white, caucasian, blond, about 25 years of age... experiment: death by strangulation; condition on leaving: revived & calmed, deep bruises around the neck (106-107).

Setting the stage for the death of the ailing protagonist Rita Chiddo at the hands of Michael, di Michele carefully dissects the causes and locations of Rita's inhibitions. In the third series of chapters in the novel we learn Rita has had three male lovers, each symbolizing her censored body that silences her voice within patriarchal discourse.

Firstly, we are introduced to Nikos, her radical leftist Greek lover turned husband, who Rita marries at the age of 30 in order to prevent the deportation of the "foreign student with sculptural beauty and an exotic accent," and "unfortunately, because she was in love with him" (29,25). Falling in love with him, she abandons herself to his foreigness and his radical ideas, while her emerging feminism and ethnicity are submerged in a constant battle with her sense of self. Thus for a false sense of safety and security, Rita squanders her freedom "to keep her young man safe in his fierce battles with injustice" (29). She explains her attraction to him: "She was drawn--all the more powerfully because it was in spite of herself--to his intelligence and intensity and the beliefs that challenged, that eclipsed, her own Catholic family values with Marxist revolutionary ones" (29).

In return, Nikos mocks Rita's sexual and moral prudeness while stealing her virginity at the age of 24. Although he espouses a certain Marxist equality, he demands a relationship from her on his own terms. In offering her his socialist ideals, Rita is able to counter and replace her traditional

heritage, thus removing herself further from the hold of her Italian patriarchal culture. But it is not her culture she is removed from, but her body, her womanly being.

After having exhausted his political resources in Canada, he returns to Athens to pursue his political activities there, leaving Rita alone as she is no longer of any use to him. His departure is shattering for her, both in confirming her solitary existence and her need to depend on a man for identity. He represented her one true experience of passion and love, a man whose children she would have liked to bear: "She had been prepared to give it all up--ambition, independence, idleness--for the one man who wouldn't ask it of her" (28).

In reflecting on what might have been, we see Rita fluctuate between reality and fantasy, a "bourgeois" fantasy that she had been unwilling to accept as her reality, when the opportunity presented itself. In Rita's eyes marriage is connected to love which "leaves scorched earth when it fails. Love for Rita had become some sacred animal, an albatross, a white whale, she had to kill," like a disease she had to protect herself from (28). This disease was her parents' marriage, her ethnic past, the safety that was Nikos and their relationship of exile.

Thus she excludes herself from loving again, and though Nikos leaves her to return to Greece, she chooses to remain legally married to Nikos for seven years. After his departure, she is left with "a piece of paper" which allows her to cling "to her obsession with Nikos because it limits the power of other men in her life," excluding herself from the possibility of marriage" (28).

Barry, the next man Rita becomes involved with, reinforces Rita's solitude and dependance on men for her existence. Barry represents the "nice guy," the "marrying type," a thoughtful man, in stark contrast to Nikos. "In contrast to Nikos, which had the thick and furious brush

strokes of a Van Gogh painting, she could visualize Barry as accurately as a black and white photograph" (30).

And like a black and white photograph, Barry possesses little sense of style or fashion and a dulled sense of inquiry. However, Barry holds a stable job as a technical school teacher, and stability--which represents boredom in Rita's eyes--is what he has to offer Rita, even though he is unwilling to date Rita for more than one year without a firm commitment from her to marry.

Unfortunately, "the nice guy" brings out the "bad girl" in Rita. As Barry likes to tell her, "she played the role of bitch, dating men, sleeping with them sometimes, but giving them no real place in her life" (28). Barry in effect, by offering her little in the way of challenge or resistance, increasingly alienates Rita from both men and herself. At least with Nikos, Rita found a foreign ally, someone with whom she could live in exile. With Barry, "a good middle-class boy who grew up in Etobicoke before the Italians moved out there," her foreigness is highlighted, her exile is not shared (33).

Ultimately through Barry, she learns a great deal about "what was *not* love" (34). As a result, safe love becomes a casualty in her attempt to reclaim her body, in as much as she proceeds to write her sexuality and her desire to play out romantic liaisons involving total risk of woman and selfhood and little risk in the realm of marriage.

Her third liaison with Pierre Bilodeau, her boss at the film company, presents this type of risk. He is married to a woman of the same age as Rita who is pregnant with "his" first child. Upon finding out about his wife's pregnancy, Rita cools the affair because she feels a sense of guilt, which only makes her appear more desirable in the eyes of Pierre.

In her involvement with a married man, Rita is able to confront and do battle with "him as the enemy, the epitome of male power and misogyny" (57). Although "Rita used to rage against him in the privacy of her office or among her

friends," she also recognizes that "[a]t the sexual decoy Pierre was an expert," (57) as "[s]o much of their sex together was a kind of sparring, trading in wit and power" (101).

For Rita, Pierre represents the evil of all men that keep her body's desire and passion silent to her. While she insists on fighting his evil force during their sexual encounters, Rita wonders whether English or French "represented the true voice of the man? She did not want to obey the English, but she gave in to the passion in his French" (213). She finds that she is no match for Pierre, who communicates his passion in French, "He knew, or he thought he knew, how to make *une fille méchante*, a smart-ass woman, shut up," but his vehicular language is English (103).

As such, not only does Pierre silence her in the public domain of the workplace, but he is able to control her in the private sphere, the safety of her own home where many of their romantic interludes take place. Similar to Michael Skelton, the serial rapist, Pierre desires to silence women through his predatory sexual practices, e.g., raping Rita to seek revenge against all women upon learning his wife has aborted their first child.

Presenting this image of woman as victim, Rita likens herself to Dr. Skelton's victims, without power and a party to their crime of sexual pleasure. Over time however, Rita's rage changes to that of interest and sexual curiosity. She becomes taken in by Pierre's power, as reflected in the space he occupies at work which she finds "luxurious, completely self-contained," "private and spacious," with "an exquisite view of the city" (58).

At every meeting with Pierre, she "found herself torn between anger and desire" (59). The relationship with Pierre, which once allowed her a safe distance from the threat or possibility of love and marriage, draws him closer to her. Although her mind does not condone the affair with "the chorus

of inner voices chanting in protest," (61) every time he beckons her, she "felt the familiar weakness in her knees, the knock, knock contradictions of her heart and head...." because she realized that "will is the primary seductive force" and sex "with this man gave her vertigo" (60).

Pierre's masculine power comes to dominate Rita's body. Although she loathes her adulterous behaviour and playing the role of the weak woman, she is not capable of overcoming the powerful physical compulsion for sex which provides her with her fleeting sense of security and selfhood. Unable to deal with her conflicting urges, Rita recognizes her only escape from the internal conflict of desire and hatred she feels for men, which is made possible by maintaining a relationship with Pierre.

The three men in Rita's life come to represent the cause and location of her inhibitions which censor her body, breath, and speech. These men represent the paper on which she writes and upon which she comes to realize the relationship between her womanhood, her sexuality, and her quest to selfhood and power.

Ironically, she realizes this when visiting Dr. Michael Skelton, to whom she has been referred. Rita visits Dr. Skelton, who comes highly recommended by her feminist friend, Margo, to try to understand her physical ailments and separate her sense of reality from fantasy. Having always suffered from painful menstrual cramps which have been discounted in previous visits to doctors, she seeks the advice of her future enemy, "the destructive powers we associate with darkness--I get that sense of power from him--but not evil.... Amoral rather than evil.... Like lasers which can be used in surgery or as weapons of war" (79).

Michael, whose power Rita finds more consuming than that of Pierre or Nikos, gives her access to her native strength previously kept hidden from her: "He seems to be cryptic, to speak with words, logical, direct, carefully considered, but

not to communicate, rather to camouflage the deeper speaking of his eyes" (79). He reinforces the communication gap that separates the power of men and the unconscious sexuality of women. Spending a great deal of time pondering this new man in her life, she declares: "I think that he's not a man, I think that he's a fantasy. A sexual one, my favourite kind" (80)! Rita assumes that Michael must also be married, a factor which makes the doctor a riskier play and even more intriguing to her. Unbeknownst to her, he will not only put an end to her physical ailments, but represents her final destruction.

In stark contrast with her confused ideas regarding men and male relationships, Rita finds a supportive community with other women: "Rita liked women... who took on responsibility with love," as she comes to realize that "[o]nly a mother could give human warmth and depth even to [male] bureaucracy," that is, with the exception of her own mother (54). When mentioning her mother, Rita does not portray a relationship of warmth and love, but rather one of duty and detachment. "To kill time and as the closest equivalent she could get to taking a cold shower, she called her mother in Detroit" (61).

Although she has left the safety of her home, she finds comfort in the nurturing support of the women around her. She shares a trusting and warm relationship with Celeste, "who was a classic secretary, a hybrid of a clerk and a mother" (54). Having escaped an abusive marriage, Celeste lives in hiding and is thankful to Rita for a means of supporting herself, thus devoting her energy full time to work for Rita. In the absence of a positive relationship with her own mother, Celeste thus serves as a mother-replacement figure for Rita.

Rita also has two close friends: Alice, who fits the mold of "most men's ideal woman--a good listener," is portrayed as a woman about to marry a lawyer who cannot tolerate her presence when she is having her period, and Margo, a strident feminist who takes great pleasure in flaunting her sexuality to the world (115). Margo is also known to hold her sensitive

police detective husband, Bo, responsible for the evils of the patriarchal system.

These women strengthen Rita's feminist principles while simultaneously challenging her on her conflict of sexual desire. While all three women's troubled relationships only serve to highlight Rita's fear of men and marriage, it remains her sexuality that keeps her a stranger unto herself, unable to recoup love no matter the risk inherent in the relationship, no matter that her movement towards self-destruction comes through sexual intercourse. "Rita often looked to sex the way some people look to alcohol or drugs: to obliterate consciousness" (61).

To blot out her conciousness and her powerlessness, Rita also engages in a number of activities that allow her to usurp control of her emotions in a male world. Attempts to experience alternate physical releases of her pent-up emotions other than through intercourse come to free her unconcious. As such, she begins to realize the decensored nature of her sexuality and her native strength. As Rita notes, jogging provides her with an "escape and weight control" for the "addicted personality and the depressed," as well as for "the narcissist, body tone and retarding the aging process" (174-175).

In effect Rita hopes that the change in her body will parallel a change in her relationships with men. "She still had to run to forget that man [Nikos]. For the drug, for the sly endorphins the body releases as it consumes itself. And she liked the sensation of her pulse at her throat, at her brow, wet and radiant with perspiration" (28). No doubt the surge of energy that she acquires from jogging appeases her sense of romantic failure in her relationship with Nikos.

However, despite her endurance, she does not seem to be able to obtain enough of a release from her jogging: "I run every day, one day of rest, clock enough miles to qualify as a marathoner, but I can't catch up with myself, the self that

might have the guts to stop and turn around and face whatever has to be done" (77). The running prevents Rita from dealing with her problematic identity, the conflict of viewing "woman as nature" and her unwillingness "to live in or with two thirds of my brain, the primitive and mammalian, to reinforce their myths, to placate their fears" (77-78).

Another physical outlet that Rita partakes in to cope with her sense of powerlessness is by getting drunk. Alcohol as a means of escape is used on several occasions in her story. She drinks to excess with her friends, Margo and Bo, on two separate occasions to soften the pain connected with their troubled relationship, and she imbibes great quantities of alcohol at Alice's wedding to blot out the sadness of the wedding and the disintegration of Margo and Bo's marriage. On several occasions Rita drinks on her own in her home to numb her pain and fight her fear of solitude.

Ultimately, to escape her self censorship, Rita engages in the act of reading and writing to give her back her womanly power, her strength, her pleasure in her womanly territory. "I believe that a book is like a world and if you love the world you want it to never end" (15). It is Rita's love for books which allow access to her imaginary, where her marital status is of no consequence. She also finds a sense of safety in books; she "liked to have books within reach during the night, the comfort of familiar fictions, the volumes, however often hugged or read, opened worlds for her, all the sweeter, all the more desirable because they are only within imaginative reach" (103). The effect of literature serves a larger function than alcohol, more than merely numbing her pain: it allows her to retreat to a more positive image of her life as a woman through her imagination.

As an artist, she is naturally attracted to the "beyond" offered in the acts of both reading and writing. In order "to organize her thoughts, to try to understand what was happening to her... she had kept a journal through the worst time of her

life, her early teens, when she felt similarly confused" (76). She recommences this writing process to sort out her confused identity and her reactions to the various male relationships that appropriated her sexuality. Once again, it is through the act of reading and writing that Rita comes to understand the importance of language, of writing herself, the stranger on display. In so doing, she can reappropriate the body that has been confiscated from her.

> Language is not objective. Language affects how things are seen. Not like putting on another pair of glasses, like putting on another pair of eyes. Language is organic, the alphabet of the chromosomes. The world needs the arts (109).

Having abandoned the notion that her identity is defined by men, that she does not need sexual pleasure to obliterate her consciousness, Rita still dies at the hands of a sexual monster. Michael, the doctor who symbolizes the ultimate power of patriarchal discourse, silences her, just as she attains power over her sexuality and her bodily territory. In giving her back her sexuality, her womanly being, Rita's death can only be believed as ironic, and perhaps as a metaphor for the immigrant dilemma (Pivato 1994, 235).

> An hour and a half and several chapters in the book and Rita thought that there was no escape quite like satire, the recreation of laughter. "Ha!" she barked, recognizing most of the characters in the novel. Then she laughed at herself, to herself, feeling sane, feeling wise, feeling in control, the various levels of critical internal voices neutralized, or more accurately, harmonizing with the chorus of voices from the novel. With such a book in hand, she could not feel lonely (211).

B. Writing as power

At the age of 40, Hélène, after having carried on an illicit ten year relationship with Pierre, finds herself alone, profoundly wounded and emotionally bereft. Pierre has abandoned his relationship with her for a more respectable and "virtuous" life with his wife and children: "Dix ans, j'ai

sagement accepté mon sort. Au seuil de la terre promise, à l'ombre du grand homme adoré. Sans un murmure. Esclave reconnaissante. J'ai trahi le commandement" (14).

Bosco's La femme de Loth explores Hélène's inability to exist within her body without a man. In doing so, Hélène embarks to reclaim her body and her desire, a body that has over time come to emprison her soul. Writing her past relationships is thus, in a sense, an act of writing her self, to redeem her self as a free woman: "Avec des mots à moi, pour effacer les tiens, cruelle sentence de rejet--verdict de mort --je m'efforcerai de découvrir un sens à ma vie" (24).

Her fragmented story, written in a series of notes from Hélène to her former lover Pierre, mixes legend and reality as well as history and personal revelation. The struggle for Hélène is that her quest for autonomy proves to be more exciting than her discovery of self: of the ailing figure passively awaiting a total revelation of being via relationship. Her painful metamorphosis as a woman seeking love and fulfillment in relationships, as noted by François Gallays, was a reflection of Québécois society at that time (44).

But the reflection is as much personal to Bosco, who, writes the child Hélène much as she perceived her own image as a child. Bosco recalls that during the war she was walking past a shop in which she noticed her reflection. She could not believe that the little girl reflected in the window was indeed her. In response, Hélène as child is also defined as a young girl who chooses to spend a great deal of her childhood in Paris at home, alone, teaching "leçons" to her dolls and reading: home is a refuge from the physical and emotional ugliness which scarred her as a child.

As a response to Hélène's lack of beauty, her parents try to transform her image through the use of clothes:

> Avant chaque sortie, ils se donnaient un mal infini pour me 'bichonner' pour la galerie.... Au lieu de

> m'amélorier, ces traitements de beauté m'enlaidissaient.... Un vrai chien barbet. Toute frisée. Habillée de beaux vêtements chers et cossus. Sur moi, ils pendaient, telles de vieilles guenilles" (28).

Even upon arriving in Montreal, Hélène carries on her parents' desire to "bichonner" herself. Moreover, determined to fit into her new environment, she states: "Je décidai de suivre leur exemple. Moi aussi, j'allais changer" (63).

With the hope of making her image more palatable to herself and the outside world, Hélène undergoes various transformations in outward appearance in each new stage of her life. Upon entering university however, after her parents untimely death, she rejects the parental imperative to transform her outward physical self and in so doing encounters her feminine destiny of inferiority: she realizes it is men who have power over women, and women who are without currency. For a single woman like Hélène, survival becomes a choice between isolation and relationship: "Extrême cruauté de notre société" (159).

But as she sits alone in her hotel room in Venice, it is the cruelty of her relationships from which she must ultimately recover, by writing the causes and locations of her anxieties and inhibitions marked within her relationships. Her writing is thus a journey to recover her unconcious self, to realize her sexuality, and gain back control over her body.

Her early stages of life are characterized by a paralytic fear of her body and her sexuality, initially at Catholic school, and later confirmed in her sexual relations with the homosexual Claude. She develops a fear of sex and of pleasure: "Horreur du contact, de tout contact charnel".... "Horreur du poil sur les mains, de la gelée des seins" (72,85).

Horrifed even by her parents' sexuality, she is repulsed by the sexual "l'odeur des 'grandes personnes' [qui] m'avait toujours clouée d'angoisse" (85). As a young girl she associates sex with a vagrant male, "se profiler l'autre regard, trouble, vacillant, les mains brutales et l'écoeurante

voix vulgaire," who wanders into her parents' apartment in New York and begins to molest her (60). She never speaks of the assault to her parents, choosing silence marked by shame and fear of her own sexual being.

Thus from a young age, Hélène learns to deal with her feelings of sexuality in passive silence. In response she chooses lovers who confirm her experience of sex as violation, and like Emile Zola, she establishes an association between sex and death: "sa hantise de la mort et du désir charnel" (86). Her sexual encounters merge both her fear of her own sexuality and a self-destructive drive to feed that fear.

The first man she has a "romantic" involvement with is Michel, a man studying to be a Catholic priest. Upon seeing him for the first time, Hélène is alerted to his strangeness of being: "Son costume me semblait un déguisement. Il avait une expression étrange, tourmentée" (124). Even his manner of notetaking was "maniaque" and "bizarre": his notetaking mirrors their relationship.

Her trysts with Michel, whom she characterizes as "l'ennemi" who "jouait de son pouvoir," are carried on in secret and "[p]eu à peu, ces 'promenades' comptèrent singulièrement dans ma vie" (128,129). Michel the priest wants to reclaim her soul for the Church, and her sexuality is an adjunct to his mission of taking power over Hélène.

In his attempt to indoctrinate her with his religious fervour, he abuses his power over Hélène by exploiting her spiritually and physically, tormenting her with his "rough touch." Hélène writes to understand the subservient role she serves in Michel's life: "Ma conversion prouverait qu'il avait le don de 'ramener au Seigneur' les brebis égarées" (129-130). Unwilling to sacrifice her Jewish identity, she decides she cannot be a part of his crusade and ends the relationship "[e]n gardant intacte ma petite âme" (132).

Her writing of her relationships takes her from the soulless Michel to the "mains d'assassin. Des pouces d'étrangleur"

of the confused and manipulative homosexual Claude Guichard (160). Hélène's choice of men feeds into her growing alienation from her body. While Claude's homosexuality lessens her fear of relationship, as there is no permanence implied, she gives up personal autonomy to be with him.

Ten years her senior, Claude forms an alliance of secrecy with Hélène in order to deceive his parents about his sexual orientation and to receive their financial support. But to secure themselves as a couple, Hélène is forced to endure "des séances abominablement longues de *necking*" after which "la nausée me submergeait pendant des heures. Je continuais" (163-164). Despite her repulsion, the relationship progresses to marriage. Claude promises Hélène "free" university studies in Paris in exchange for marrying him in order that he may secure his father's inheritance.

No one questions her motives for marrying Claude, much to her dismay: she must be the only one who knows his sexual leanings. She willingly makes "le sacrifice de ma vie mais de ma bonne foi" (193). Pledging her marital vows alongside Claude within a Catholic Church, she feels completely alienated from her self, instead of "entourée, enracinée, soutenue" by her Jewish heritage and family (195).

No sooner does the marriage becomes official than Claude's treatment of Hélène becomes sexually abusive. On their honeymoon, she becomes his "trophée de guerre: Hélène, ma femme," and feels "la peur animale d'être prise au piège" (204,202). He rapes her several times to consummate the marriage and to impregnate her: her roles are to be his wife and the mother of his children in this "gymnastique répugnante." Outside of these roles she is not allowed an identity.

Fearful that an unwanted child will bind them together forever, as she too bound her parents, she leaves Claude as soon as she finds out that she is not pregnant. For her, life with Claude had become "mort, moralement," for "un véritable

recommencement... mon voyage vers la liberté" (215,221). However, her quest for freedom, her chance to reconnect to her body and her sexuality, comes to an abrupt end upon meeting her next lover, Pierre.

Rather than dealing with her troubled unconscious to achieve autonomy, Hélène attaches herself to another man. Her destructive journey is continually driven by the false hope that men can offer her the power to save herself from her internal fear and anxiety. In fact, she only becomes more isolated, less autonomous, and more dependant.

During their affair Pierre remains distanced, separate, and emotionally limited as his stone-like name implies. He is an inconstant lover, who worries more about his comfortable life with his wife than his responsibility to Hélène; worse, he fears her absolute passion.

For Hélène, Pierre reincarnates feelings of unbridled passion and sensuality. Thus she puts him up on a pedestal as her saviour: "Tu m'avais rendu mon nom, accepté de me nommer dans ton coeur. De me donner une place où je pouvais vivre au grand jour de l'amour" (274). Yet it is only to satisfy his sexual needs that Pierre offers Hélène his love: it is without connection to his passion as her lover.

As a selfish lover he is identified with his sex: "hommes avares de temps, de mots, de douceur. Eux appartiennent à un clan dont ils sont fiers. Riche tribu des forts dont tu as été exclue dès ta naissance" (14). Pierre's selfishness and gender doubly reinforce Hélène's exclusion as a woman in patriarchal society. Her alienation from her body takes place in a world where women, without their own scripts of desire, give up their sexuality to the dominant phallus.

As Hélène writes her self and the concommitant dysfunctional relationships with Michel, Claude, and Pierre, she locates the cause and location of her deadened self and sexuality. But it is not until she rages against the universal and historical oppression and evil of the bad male that she

realizes she has the capacity to open up her own censored conscience onto her sexuality and womanly being.

As she writes her experiences of love, Hélène finds escape through her imaginary. As her memories catch up with her present, she finds awareness and solace in the knowledge that her tragic relationships and suffering are reflected in great literature: "Quel âge avait Bérénice? Elle n'était plus jeune, ce me semble. Depuis toujours, j'escomptais le sort qui m'attendait car je préférais cette tragédie à toutes les autres" (16). It is as if Hélène's fate has been predetermined by a tragic heroine. Thus for every tragic relationship in her life, Hélène finds fictional corroboration with the heroines of French classical tragedy destroyed by their lovers: Phèdre, Bérénice, even Thérèse Desqueyroux.

Pierre's betrayal of his mistress is explicitly compared with the betrayal of the biblical Peter. Hélène, preferring to reside in her imaginary, fantasizes her tragic love for Pierre in biblical terms: "Sur le mont des Oliviers, Pierre s'est endormi. Toi, tu as dormi entre mes bras. Il est impossible que tu ne te réveilles pas, avant mon agonie. Pierre, pour l'amour de ce Dieu auquel tu prétends croire, ne m'abandonne pas" (255).

But it is the image of Lot's wife who Hélène most closely aligns her self with. Like Lot's wife, her biblical archetype, she too engages in a backward glance, searching for an explanation, calculating her loss. Like the pillar, fixed in place and time, her loss with Pierre is to suffer her ultimate humiliation and dehumanization alone. Hélène is no more than a statue or pillar, clinging to a nostalgic attachment to the past out of respect for it. Tears relieve Hélène: "La petite fille aux allumettes se transformant en furie, foudre au poing" (157). They are her compensation, her escape from victimhood.

Bosco's references to French literature and to the Bible link these fundamental archetypes with Hélène's experiences as

a sacrificial victim: a victim of the dominant Québécois society, its rigid Catholicism, and its morally base patriarchy as charcterized by her lovers. The sum of her victimization is to render her incapable of responding to her victimhood except in measured, self-preserving terms as a victim (Davies 137).

Writing her self, Hélène explores the victimization of her body in relation to her place in the world, not of deliberate choice, but of effective determinants and psychological summary (Gallays 40). She contrasts her sacrifice in her relationships with Claude and Michel to the one with Pierre: "Avec Michel et Claude, j'ai souffert faiblement. A toi, je me suis vraiment donnée. Corps et âme. Et me voilà perdue, corps et biens" (191). Her feelings of sexual and emotional betrayal by Pierre make her feel like a prostitute, a body without a mind. Her last sexual encounter with Pierre reinforces Hélène's alienation from her own body:

> Nous avons mimé les gestes de l'amour. J'ai atteint le fond du marécage... j'entends ma voix dans ce désastre de la défaite des corps qui ne portent plus l'âme mais leur poids douloureux de chair misérable. Voix plaintive et fausse des putains (11-12).

In recounting her relations with Michel, Claude and Pierre, Hélène writes her inability to choose an appropriate lover: "Je n'ai pas eu de chance dans mes choix. Tu ne voulais pas de mon âme, il ne voulait pas de mon corps. Le seul homme avec qui j'ai essayé de 'faire ma vie' ne voulait ni de l'une ni de l'autre" (132). She is never loved in her body and her soul, as the men she becomes involved with only attach themselves to the one aspect of her self, that aspect of her self she has feared since childhood: her sexuality.

This separation of body and soul binds itself to images and interpretation of a religious sort: to love Pierre, writes Hélène, is to "s'engager à lui" like to Jesus Christ. She aptly compares love to religion: love when it goes beyond pure

sexual attraction is similar to religious fundamentalism. In reflecting on her relationship with Pierre, Hélène comes to realize that the laws of love are as inflexible as the ten commandments and are therefore difficult to respect.

But with the loss of Pierre comes the loss of passion which represents the loss of the object of herself. Leaving her abandoned and feeling increasingly empty, she reflects on her loss: "Tu m'as tuée. Je n'existe plus. Réduite à néant" (8). Not only has she given up her entire self to him, but she has also renounced her Jewish roots once again: "Toi, qui es un vrai Gentil, vois comme je plie l'échine. J'apostasie à chaque occasion favorable" (19).

Writing her relationships, Hélène places herself in opposition to her self. Realizing that she has unconditionally submitted to the arbitrariness of her lovers, (Goldin 28) she wishes that she had been "une 'vraie femme'.... Elles, on les épouse, on respect leur avis," instead of living "comme un servante... vivre en marge des lois du bon monde" (181-182). Her obvious discovery of her weakness for playing the role of the enslaved victim does not halt her seduction of and her necessity to be with Pierre. In fact, victimhood is a profound condition of her existence. Hélène chooses Pierre knowing it will lead to failure: "Pourquoi avoir choisi--s'interroge Hélène--les hommes qui pouvaient les plus sûrement me détruire" (161)?

She responds to her inquiry by referring back to her childhood days, when she always used to enjoy playing the roles "de femme sacrifiée et bafouée," "artisan de [s]a destruction" (46,242). Even in understanding her past as an adult, she is not free from the seeds of her victimhood. Unable to let go of her past, she swears to seek revenge from Pierre, a threat that never reaches him:

> Je souffre moins à l'idée d'arranger à ma guise--enfin c'est moi qui décide--la fin de cette histoire. Je peux te décrire inconsolable. Bête. Mesquin. Je délimiterai les ravages, les tortures. Si je le veux, tu seras laid,

> vulgaire. Tu es inconscient et lâche, je te rendrai jaloux. Tout m'est possible. Je me vengerai. A ton tour de souffrir. Pauvre innocent. Tu ignores ce qui t'attend. Tu lis si peu (154).

Hélène writes her "novel" prior to her planned suicide as a means of fictional revenge. Her writing comes to symbolize both her undoing and her salvation as Hélène exorcises her desire of self-destruction of "[c]e corps mort" in the act of writing. In writing her self she recognizes that she must deal with the silence that she writes, the locations and causes of her fear and anxiety.

Ultimately, she recognizes that amorous reciprocity has been fictionally impossible for her, and in that realization, she gains access to her womanly being, her self and sexuality, renouncing her pending suicide:

> Trop tard, tu comprendras qu'il est dangereux de réduire un être à la dépendance absolue. La plus amorphe des créatures retrouve un jour le goût de la résistance, ne peut indéfiniment encaisser les brimades. Il y a des enfants, paraît-il, qui n'éprouvent pas le froid, le chaud, la douleur. A tout moment, ils sont en danger de mort. Longtemps, j'ai vécu ainsi. Sans savoir que je souffrais. J'émerge de ce long sommeil. Je ne peux plus ignorer les outrages subis. Il est ignoble d'être complice et partenaire de certains supplices. Le passage de l'esclavage à la raison est plein de traîtise. Je suis décidée à l'emprunter (156).

C. Reconciling desire

Approaching the age of 40, Rita and Hélène feel the need to write their selves: to review their feelings of alienation within their relationships with men in order to gain power over their future as autonomous women. Their confessional stories function for them as a manner to rewrite their selves through writing their bodies. And the process of hearing their bodies speak allows them to slowly reclaim their womanhood from the depths of their unconscious.

Both Hélène and Rita's interior monologues emphasize the obsessively repetitive, enclosed, and abusive nature of their relationships with men. With detachment and irony, Hélène shapes the painful fragments of her life into a coherent resource from which she may renew herself. Rita too writes in her childhood diary to help her piece together difficult moments in her life, "to order my existence with something more than chronology" (76). Like Hélène, Rita needs to establish a sense of order in the vernacular of the here and now or else she will cease to exist in the mythic; a "Crone-ology", as Mary Daly puts it, wholly out of time with the chronology (Daly 16).

Attempting to establish order in their lives, Hélène and Rita must return to their childhoods and their ethnicity. Although di Michele devotes very little space in her novel to a description of Rita's relationship with her parents, we come to know that her feelings toward her mother are impersonal and dutiful, while her feelings toward her Italian father are warm and loving. "With a pang Rita visualized her father, his small wiry frame, his tanned smiling face. Her father was the eternal optimist... he always made things grow and flourish" (62).

Her knowledge of Italian culture is through her knowledge of food names which comes from her father's passion for food. In creating a sense of home for Rita at his kitchen table in Detroit, her father offers her a chance to renew her familial life of stability in her new milieu, Toronto. Her mother explains it: "He seems to think that a place-setting can protect you or preserve you in some way" (64).

As well as defining their ethnicity, the protagonists' ethnicity foregrounds their choice of roles as women. Despite Rita's fondness for her father and her desire "to identify with her Italian half," she feels as an adult she is adopting her mother's depressive North American personality (109). Worse, she sees her mother's vocation in life as wife, which

Rita simultaneously rejects and desires as reflected in the ironic inner voice she borrows from Ingrid Bergman in *Casablanca*: "I'm tired, Rick, and I can't think. You think for me, Rick" (62). Existence in Toronto away from her family, her country, and her ethnicity, Rita fears her solitude. Thus her lapses in strength are accounted for by wishing she could rely on someone else, a male partner, "to believe in life for her" (62).

Hélène too lives out her adulthood rejecting her parents as models for relationship. As an adolescent, she attempts to emulate her mother's perfection as a woman, yet views her parents' idyllic marriage as a form of relationship she will never experience: she is not perfect like her mother. Rita's and Hélène's mothers appear as tyrannical forces who have imprisoned the protagonists on two levels: a physical one represented by their grotesqueness (in Hélène's case, ugly and skinny and trying to fatten her up); and a psychological one, represented by their Italian and Jewish environments they perceive as alien.

As they mature as women, it is the memories of their mothers that torment them, sewing confusion in their identities: how to become the mother of strength and power and defeat the daughter of submission and and dependency (Sciff-Zamaro 1985, 90)? Exhuming their childhood is thus primary to moving toward knowledge and power over their beings as women.

Hélène realizes that she cannot blame her parents for her present state of affairs, "Certes, ils avaient raison de trembler pour moi. Il faut que tu apprennes à te défendre," as she does not heed her parent's advice and learn how to protect herself from the outside world (20).

Unlike Hélène, Rita blames her parents for failing to protect her from her mistakes in life. "They had not even come to her mock wedding.... It would have been real, a real marriage, if they had made the trip to bless it" (63). With the disintegration of her marriage to Nikos, a marriage that

for all purposes was not based on reality, she chooses to blame her parents for the abuse she suffered, thereby making them complicit in her alienation.

Not only does Rita hold her parents responsible for her failure in marriage, but also for the lack of upward mobility in her career. Enmeshed in a myriad of negative feelings about her parents, Rita senses her mother's lack of respect for her career choice. "After all they [Rita's films] didn't play at the Roxy. They weren't distributed by Twentieth Century Fox. They didn't star Paul Newman. Because they weren't entertainments--the kind of film everybody her mother knew saw--they couldn't be real" (63). In not validating Rita and her work, Rita's mother reinforces Rita's alienation from her self, never certain of the validity of her life choices in both career and relationships.

Surprisingly, both protagonists' parents cannot appreciate their daughters' penchant for artistic expression as a means of supporting themselves. Hélène's parents perceive her love of literature to be without value in a similar manner as Rita's parents find her film work. This inability to identify with Hélène's passion for books in turn alienates them as participants in Hélène's private world of fantasy.

As a result, their world is written from the point of view of the child who sees only outward image as important. Hélène's inner feelings, of isolation, difference, or powerlessness, must be erased. In order to assimilate, to realize her parents' fantasy in Montreal, Hélène takes up appearances, and begins to allow her body and soul to be confiscated from her.

Still, both protagonists while physically and emotionally isolated from their parents, make effort to obtain their love and approval. In rewriting her past, Hélène reconciles with both her mother and father, even though she felt abandoned by them as a child. Sensing her solitude even then, she tries to be as invasive in her parents' lives as possible. Yet for all

her attempts to be included in their lives, she never senses their desire to love and include her.

Thus she distances her self from her memories. Her parents are a very beautiful, united couple: "Je n'ai jamais rencontré de couple mieux accordé" (25). And as a parental couple, they serve as her first model of a human love relationship: but it is a model, and its likeness is unattainable to her.

Like Hélène, Rita is an only child who is dependent on the love and approval of her parents. Absent her parent's approval or love, she is invalidated as a woman. Perhaps it is the validation of their sexualities the protagonists confuse for the absence of parental love in general. But it is this lack of feeling whole, for which they look to relationships to fill and the possibility of perfection in love to validate their womanhood, that they constantly do battle with as adults.

Within this battle, both protagonists lead lives of self-delusion, portrayed structurally and thematically in the novels in an ironic manner. Hélène and Rita write their pasts utilizing the ambiguous dynamic of illusion and reality. Both characters' blurred perceptions dramatize the tragi-comic effects of mistaking illusion for reality--in Rita's case, she is unable to distinguish between the two, resulting in her murder (Palmer 94). However both recognize their desire to confuse their reality with fantasy in their relationships with men.

Rita reflects on "how much of life was spent wished away or waiting: as an adolescent for romance and "real" life, as a middle-aged woman for romance and retirement" (56). She recognizes the fact that "[s]ome people live more in their imaginations than in their real life. She was someone like that" (233). In writing her life story, she recalls all the "conditionals," things she could have done to improve her life. "She should have entered a serious marriage" (56). But

2 OF/DE 2

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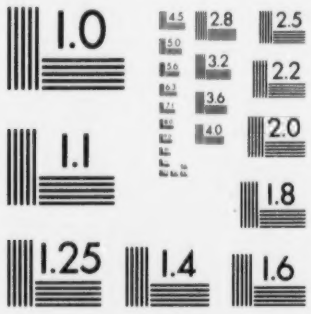
NBS 1010a ANSI/ISO #2 EQUIVALENT



PRECISION[SM] RESOLUTION TARGETS

they both become vulnerable in his presence because Pierre offers the opportunity to heal old wounds, forcing them to acknowledge the cause and location of their silence (Nyquist 174).

In choosing to have a relationship with Pierre, Rita and Hélène find confirmation in the image of themselves as middle-aged femme fatales, images they both wish to shed in favour of being "femmes totales." Yet they both falter at times, finding themselves embroiled in feelings of undying love for their supposed saviours.

Rita, like Hélène, holds a desire to prove wrong this depraved interpretation of love she holds for herself. But for Rita, it is her powerlessness in the world that forces her to retreat into herself, to cope with these loves by emotionally separating herself from the "acted" event (Stone 141). As prisoners uable to flee their own fantasies, both protagonists end up utilizing narcotics and alcohol to dampen the pain they realize in their sexual fantasies, to numb the pain and detach their soul from the sexual act, their powerless reality.

Detachment for both female protagonists is a natural consequence of the violent rituals of sex they participate in. As submissive victims of their sexuality, both dissociate their minds from their bodies so they can hope to at least derive the physical pleasure of sex without incurring its ensuing emotional vengeance. This detachment from their bodies is unfortunately a tactic once again learned in their childhoods. Hélène, suffers from having an unpleasing body: "je me découvrais le fruit raté de leur commune maladresse," and a weak body: "J'étais frêle, malingre", which although it gathers its forces, remains awkward: "J'ai rarement été 'bien dans ma peau'.... Révoltante injustice" (26,28,29).

This lack of physical comfort in their bodies results in both protagonists trying to take control over them. Both protagonists become anorexic, Hélène as a young child rebelling against her parents' overfeeding ("J'avalais puis

j'allais vomir" (28).), and Rita as an adult to maintain a seductive appearance.

In a world where physical beauty is exalted, particularly the beauty of the female body, being deprived of beauty means being deprived of existence, as Hélène declares: "Refoulée dans ... la non-existence," because she realizes that in order to have a relationship, female beauty is important (136). "Hier je ne me doutais de rien.... Où le jeter, s'en débarrasser?" (7-8) Like Hélène, Rita feels herself withdraw her mind from her body, viewing herself as an object of Pierre's desires, and not the subject: "When she felt so divided she had a sense that she was merely observing herself, as if through the eye of a distant camera" (59).

Rita casts herself as a character in her own life, unwilling to play the starring role. She tries to remain objective about her passivity. She aligns herself "with the Nazi doctor quizzing Primo Levi at Auschwitz. In such eyes Primo saw method. He saw clinical detachement. He saw himself, reflected from those azure orbs as from a distorting mirror" (109). Similar to her experience with Dr. Skelton, Rita attempts to "reflect not to respond. To be objective... not subjective" (109).

It is their objectivity which connotes passivity for both protagonists. Both Hélène and Rita recognize and bemoan the enjoyment they experience in acting out the role of the victim. Both condemn their inability to reject this self-image, holding on to a desire to overcome and become whole subjects. Hélène admits to herself her submissive role: "J'avais refoulé ce désir étranger de souffrance où le goût de ma propre destruction et détestation l'emportait," allowing herself to be a passive observer of her destiny (190).

Reflecting upon her victimization, Hélène looks back to her ancestral victims, the silenced women of the Bible. Rather than aligning herself with the Bible, Rita metaphorically challenges the institution of medicine to cure her victimhood:

as a victim of herself and of patriarchy, she is plagued with "Dis-ease", which no doctor is able to detect as "[t]hey've all read the same, one book, the book written by a human without a uterus" (78).

Both Bosco and di Michele abhor passivity, associating it with evil, and do not condone it in their female characters. Their acceptance of being victimized by the men in their lives is thus disturbing to Hélène and Rita, because they both feel responsible for allowing it to happen.

Like Hélène, the role of victim is played out by Rita in a passive manner toward the men in her relationships. Rita's passivity is highlighted when Pierre rapes her, evoking in her confused feelings of pleasure and horror:

> All her consciousness had slipped down to her sex, to the piercing pain of his entrance. Her mind, her personality had been effectively erased. He beat against her, hard surf against a soft sand shoal and her body dissolved in pain and then in something like pleasure as her body lubricated. Her body wanted to save her with pleasure. Save and enslave (217).

During the assault on her body, she realizes that she is a victim, helpless in protecting herself from his savage attack. According to Mary Nyquist, the female notion of romance is linked to violence incurred sexually through a process of denial, which re-presents victimized heroines as transformed into subjects who 'author' their own desire for violent men (Neuman and Stephenson 10).

Hélène too authors her own rape by Claude despite her revulsion of him: "J'étais partagée entre le désir de me laisser faire pour que ce soit vite fini et une si profonde révolte de ce 'viol' que je luttais surnoisement pour l'empêcher d'arriver à ses fins" (208). But as she progresses in the writing of her story, she becomes repulsed by his violent actions: "Tout est ignoble dans la vie. Dans la trahison. En guerre, torturée par l'ennemi, j'aurais été d'une absolue lâcheté, trahissant la terre entière pour reculer l'échéance de la douleur" (10-11). Fighting his attempt to

silence her creative powers, she tries to retaliate in words: "Il faudrait retrouver la voix. Crier, se rouler à terre, trépigner. Hurler à l'injustice, à la spoliation," but all she can respond with is silence (237).

Hélène and Rita do not own their desire or share a feminine language that can express "no," for as women and ethnics, they are forced to silently live their pain. Their participation in these submissive relationships represents their attempt to survive within the pressures of the patriarchal outside world, and to simultaneously achieve some sense of acceptance within it as outsiders. They can only participate in the violations of their sexuality, as it is the only discourse available to them: both recognize their sexual assaults as not only a betrayal of their bodies and souls, but also of their womanhood.

The men in their lives further reinforce their marginal role as ethnic. During an afternoon sexual rendez-vous, Pierre feels Rita's stomach and notices the coarseness of her skin. Ashamed of her ethnic roots as reflected in her body, she explains: "I'm not ethnic enough to show off my excess body hair" (105). She equates the lack of physical beauty with her Italian culture, both parts of her identity which she tries to erase. To counter this negative ethnic self-perception, they both continually attempt to transform themselves through changes in body and clothing.

When invited over to Pierre's house for a sexual rendez-vous, Rita decides to change her clothes: "Although the clothes she wore were comfortable, Rita chose to change her sweat shirt for something sexy, a black silk jersey which made her body appear fluid with motion" (213). But her body and clothes cannot help to cover her rough skin and excessive body hair, or erase her ethnic origins.

Hélène also imagines that a change in clothes will result in a transformation of who she is: "j'allais changer. J'étais bourrée de bonnes résolutions de transformation pour faire

honneur à ce nouveau monde, présenter l'image attendue" (63-64). Whereas Rita's attempts at cloaking herself make her appear more feminine in the eyes of men, Hélène realizes that her attempts at changing her outfits to please Pierre do not succeed: "Quand je te croyais lassé d'une défroque, je passais à une autre, au lieu de comprendre que c'était moi que tu n'acceptais pas. Peu importe le déguisement. Le personnage ennuie" (64).

It is ironic both protagonists intensely dislike their bodies and identify their lack of beauty with their lack of independence as women and ethnics. Unlike di Michele's protagonist's experience of the pleasure of sex by her body, Bosco's protagonist doesn't experience the beauty of the body as transformed through pleasure. Rather her body is deprived of a centre and a psyche sufficiently constituted to provide itself autonomy: J'ai toujours été étonnée de voir mon ombre se profiler sur un mur, sur le sol" (147). Thus Hélène complains of her existence as banal, being a woman without husband and without beauty.

If their sexuality is to make any sense, it must be seen as the force that allows Rita and Hélène to deny their own womanhood. Rita believes that sex can fill the void in her life, the alienation that she feels as an ethnic woman. "There was something ravenous in Rita, a hole, a gaping hole, at the center of herself. It was an abyss where a woman should have been" (120). Defending her adulterous activities with Pierre to her two attached friends, she admits that she uses sex "to obliterate my consciousness, my loneliness if you will. My aloneness" (123). Sex becomes her temporary companion, a way to feel alive that ironically deadens her to her own sexuality and needs as a woman. It is only after Pierre rapes her that she understands the nature of the term "Wargasm" and the effect it had upon her as a woman: (234)

> The scene was pornographic. What Pierre had just done to her had nothing to do with making love. Perhaps it would

> be impossible to ever make love with anyone again. Least of all with Pierre. Any illusions she had cherished about what she might mean to him, about love with him, about loving him, had just been annihilated. The man had needed her that night in some way that had nothing to do with the woman she was. He had used her. But worse, she had allowed herself to be used (218).

Like the rape of Hélène by Claude, the sexual activity Rita experiences with Pierre is "impersonal, destructive, a force she had instantly recognized" as placing her in a position of powerlessness (218). Although she feels annihilated, the experience has transformed her sense of failure, her mistakes in relationships, out of the personal realm and into a kind of "war zone" (239). Her final illusion is shattered: sex with any man will no longer bring redemption. Capable of hatred, both characters must transform themselves from the passive victim to active agent.

Rita's new found power is put into practice when she confronts the deranged Dr. Skelton in the ravine, her abyss. "Not to wait for it, not to observe passively, comfortably sitting in a garden chair. No, this time Rita feels that she must be part of such stirring, that she must become birdsong, that aural landscape lit from within" (257). Realizing her native strength and womanly resources, she does battle with the enemy with the assistance of her sisters from the past (Cleopatra) and the present (Madonna): only she can defend her life and take power over her destiny.

To fight her powerlessness, Hélène writes to obliterate her pain, but the act of writing makes her the agent of her fate and of Pierre's fate: "Me voilà déjà en plein liberté pour faire et dire ce que je veux, sur ce papier. Sans que tu me contredises.... Je donnerai des cauchemars. Des remords. Des regrets" (153-154).

Hélène realizes her need to assume a passive role in her relationships isolates her from her self. As Hélène no longer feels deceived by Pierre, she is now able to take symbolic revenge on him and on her former self: "Je n'écris ces pages

que pour en arriver au beau meurtre rituel, à la grande fête symbolique où je me donnerai la mort avec éclat. Je la tuerai, bien proprement, cette affreuse donzelle qui n'a réussi, pendant dix ans, qu'à vivre dans ton ombre, en bêlant" (155). She too is able to transform the history of past suffering, as both Jewess, and in relation to the men of her past, by declaring to Pierre:

> Dieu t'a peut-être créé à son image. Pas moi. Je suis contente d'être femme, juive, sans pays, patrie, famille, biens. Sans rien. Trahie.... Le suicide se dérobe comme l'amant de passage (262-263).

Hélène can go on because she has given up her past, having managed to "oublier la mort de la passion" and realizes the decensored relation of her self from her sexuality (281). Hélène, unlike Lot's wife, is able to separate herself from her past; Lot's wife is immobilized by her past. But whereas the biblical figure is punished for turning back, Hélène benefits from returning to the past. In writing her body, she comes to understand her ailment, her relationships with men, thus giving her access to her sexuality, her womanly identity, and her true self.

Rita's transforming break with her past arrives in the guise of a postcard from Nikos, informing her of his upcoming marriage:

> What hadn't been decided went by default. Like her childless condition. Like her life without Nikos. Her singular life.... She was free. The past was "Greek" to her, indecipherable, but the future seemed clear, the future was no longer the past, needing endless rewriting, clarification, explication, however much we have to revise that past in order to live each new day (237).

Finally able to separate herself from her unhealthy dependence on male relationships and her past, Rita can proceed to reclaim her body and her womanly self from the past. Like Hélène, she too comes to realize that denying her sexuality, her womanhood, requires that she acquire power over her sexuality and womanhood. Freedom and self-definition arise

when women access their own will separate from patriarchal discourse.

As Hélène and Rita discover, one of the main functions of feminine literature is to provide this reversal of patriarchal archetypes, of creating new myths and discourses that redefine the symbolism of patriarchy instead of writing from within its confines (Escoumel 94). Hélène confirms this notion as set out by her predecessor: "La littérature 'féminine' est d'ordre utilitaire. Pour quelques centaines d'années! Une phrase de Simone de Beauvoir m'a ravie, dans ses Mémoires. Elle y avoue n'avoir écrit L'Invitée que pour trucider une rivale" (154).

Breaking with the destructive patterns inscribed for women and their sexuality under patriarchy, Bosco and di Michele recreate myths, giving life to the "statue of salt," dissolving the gender boundaries that limit both Hélène and Rita's womanhood. By breaking the silence imposed by male discourse, these authors return the language of desire to the mother tongue on behalf of all ethnic women (Smith 190).

CHAPTER THREE

IV. FRAGMENTATION AS INTEGRATION

> Cultural difference marks the establishment of new forms of meaning and strategies of identification, through processes of negotiation where no discursive authority can be established without revealing the difference of itself. The signs of cultural difference cannot then be unitary or individual forms of identity because their continual implication in other symbolic systems always leaves them "incomplete" or open to cultural translation.... Cultural difference is to be found where the "loss" of meaning enters, as a cutting edge, into the representation of the fullness of the demands of culture.... Cultural difference emerges from the borderline moment of translation.... The transfer of meaning can never be total between differential systems of meaning, or within them... it is the articulation through incommensurability that structures all narratives of identification and all acts of cultural translation (Bhabba cited in Gunew 1993ii, 3-4).

According to Patricia Smart, ethnic women tend to use a fragmented form of writing to present an alternate way of representing, listening, and touching the "texture of real," to articulate their cultural difference (Cited in Hébert 136). In this way ethnic women writers become cultural mediators. They are agents who bring together the fragments of their past while inventing a culture in a new environment through their writing for a unique audience: ethnic women in Canada (Chametzky cited in Pivato 1994, 73).

In writing for this unique audience, different strategies of language are often employed to link gender and culture. Writing from a position of cultural marginality, many utilize language that expresses itself in a confrontation of codes within the literary text. As such, ethnicity can therefore manifest itself on a linguistic level (Simon 1991, 39). However, as language and language level is associated with place (as defined by Henri Gobard), what has been lived in

one's dialect (i.e., Yiddish) can never cross the boundary and become real in one's referential language (i.e., French).

As such, the mythic language inhabits a separate being within that pulls the new information of the vehicular and referential languages toward itself. Yet while the vernacular and the mythic are attracted to one another, they can never penetrate each other. Therefore, despite the fact that the ethnic writer has stopped speaking her dialect at a young age and the life she has lived in that language is remote and forgotten, she never feels that her vehicular, referential, or even her mythic languages express her true self: it is her dialect which will always express her true self. As Dorina Michelutti remarked, "Externalized, rendered foreign, I can take myself back in the form of another language. This is integration not assimilation" (Michelutti 131). This cultural difference is expressed via a unique symbolic language, a language that embodies a re-imagining of both the past lived and the past imagined.

Sherry Simon remarks that ethnicity re-imagined becomes a problematic of memory, a work of traces and fragments, and ceases to be the psychological expression of a group of fixed cultural values: an expression of cultural marginality (Simon 1991, 39). For example, Monique Bosco's Hélène spends a great deal of her time collecting the fragments of her memory: "Je reconstituais des bribes, des fragments. J'avais horreur des vrais puzzles, mais celui-ci me fascinait. Morceau par morceau, ils livraient, à regret, leurs secrets" (33). Memory is also an important source in Mary di Michele's writing: "Memory changes everything, memory selects and heightens, obscures and shapes experience, and when we remember, we remember with everything we know about life and about language" (di Michele cited in Norris 9).

Through the act of writing Régine Robin also transforms the question of ethnicity into a problematic of memory, albeit multiple fragmented memories. Her writing, an example of

postmodern writing, is maintained in a space between identities, in a space outside of the construction of identity "hors-identitaire" in which one cannot belong, but rather exists in a space of real or imagined exile that is expressed in the text.[9] In this manner, remembering (piecing together the fragments of culture) works in contradiction, setting distance and expressing difference with itself (Verdicchio 1990i, 120).

Whether viewed from a psychological, sociological, or literary perspective, all memories share a centre of pain. This pain is situated at the locus of an identity crisis for the dislocated immigrant, who struggles to become authentic in her "new world self" (Palmer 69). This personal and communal identity crisis, as defined by Palmer, is also a crisis of language, engendered by a complex gap between perception and expression. The way to exhume this pain is through remembering, an act of the imagination.

In Robin's case, her "new country" is Quebec, and it is in this place that she must transcend the characteristics of the immigrant, obliterating her pain through writing. But before determining her place in the present, she must define her position with regard to the people who shaped her past.

Born in Paris to Polish emigrés at the advent of World War II, Robin grew up with the intimate knowledge of two languages, Yiddish and French. Yiddish was the only language her mother spoke during the war (her father was a prisoner of war in Germany), and it was only spoken in the confines of their home. While Yiddish became her mother tongue, it also came to represent for her a language of hiding and imprisonment, the language of the victim:

> La langue des origines est comme perdue: perte du public, perte des lectures, perte de la sociabilité, perte du

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[9] The term "l'identitaire" is defined as the "l'identité considérée comme une construction" (Simon, L'Hérault, Schwartzwald, and Nouss 9).

> sens de la perte, perte d'une perte. La langue était déjà en voie de disparition à cause de la force de l'assimilation, mangée par le russe, l'anglais, l'allemand ou le français. *Perte* réelle qui va se redoubler d'une perte fantasmatique. Le yiddish c'est le *tabou*. Kafka en fait une langue fondamentale sans grammaire, la terre engloutie de la liberté. Le vrai lieu c'est *l'allemand*, le yiddish devient le double imaginaire de l'allemand, une langue dévalorisée, *objet de honte* (Robin 1990, 9).

During the war Robin spent much of her time with an exuberant French woman, Juliette, who took her on numerous outings to the theatre and spoke to her only in French. French, the language of Juliette, a language filled with the exuberance of Parisian nightlife, quickly became the public language in her life. Robin abandoned Yiddish shortly after the war's end owing to the negative connotations the language embodied for her, and solely used the French language. It subsequently took Robin many years to reintegrate Yiddish, the language of her private self, in her adult life.

Based on these early childhood experiences, Robin developed a dichotomous relationship with her mother tongues: these languages occupied different spaces within her mind, each associated with different memories of the war. This duality of language reinforced her experience as a young woman of being a foreigner within her own home. As a student, Robin learned English, Spanish, and German, and later, through her research as an academic, Russian. These languages, in addition to French, became her vehicular and referential languages. In addition to her mother tongue, Yiddish, her other mythic language is Hebrew, the languages of her ancestors.

Moving to Montreal in the '70s, Robin encountered a similar form of experience with language as she had in France growing up: languages in Montreal have a duplicitous nature for many of its inhabitants. As Leonard Cohen writes in Beautiful Losers, the languages of Montreal each have a place: English is spoken in underground spaces and closed places of Montreal (e.g., movie theatres, psychiatric hospitals); and

French is spoken in public places (e.g., parks). The other languages of Montreal share a mythical space, before or outside of its history (Cohen cited in Simon 1991, 99-100).

Although Robin never felt like an immigrant in Paris, despite spending part of her childhood in hiding with immigrant parents, she felt like a "foreigner in the same language" upon moving to Canada at the age of 35. Her French defined her difference: in accent, in culture, and socio-political history, "a conflict of cultural and literary codes" (Simon cited in Purdy 1990, 29). Unable to abandon her Jewish European origin in Canada and redefine herself in Quebec as Québécois, Robin developed a division in her life, a schizophrenic lifestyle reflected in her dual dialects. In Montreal she works at home, teaches at the university, and researches in the library, remaining inside. In Paris, where she also lives, she accesses a cultural and social life in the cafés, out on the street.[10]

This conflict is reflected in her complex use of cultural and literary codes and in her use of language. For Robin language has come to represent more than simply a means of communication; it is a creative tool used for communicating difference. As such, she has developed her own code of signs with which to explore the dichotomy of culture and language she has experienced as an immigrant in Quebec and in France.

At the age of 41, Robin chose to explore this dichotomy in her novel La Québécoite, which she wrote between 1979 and 1981. Living in exile in Quebec allowed Robin (who had married a man from Montreal) via her novel to journey *from* language, *through* language: the enabling condition of a poetics of transgression (Purdy 1990, 25). Through this transgression in

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[10] Eli Mandel notes that the ethnic voice is essentially schizophrenic: a condition that is a form of "psychic anarchy" brought on, using R.D. Laing to explain, by an "involuntary attempt of the self to free itself from a repressive social reality" (Palmer 68).

her writing, Robin attempts to find her self in her new environment and understand her cultural difference. Paradoxically, through the transgression of her writing, she has come to accept the impossibility of being her self solely in Montreal, or in France, unable to locate a single place to define her self.

La Québécoite is also a journey of discovery, of reconstructing memory, similar to the journeys of Monique Bosco, Mary Melfi, and Mary di Michele. In La Québécoite, we are taken by a nameless female narrator on a fragmented journey through the multi-layered city of Montreal. "Le trouble du nom propre, lorsqu'il se perd--lorsqu'il change--lorsque le signifiant quotidien, la marque, l'insigne, la signature changent" (61). Along her journey, the narrator must confront and examine her history and her present, forgetting and remembering, alienation and integration, as well as fragmentation and completeness, in order to locate her identity as an ethnic and a woman in Montreal.

In locating this identity, I will initially examine the structure of the novel, linking the protagonist's past and her present. This past is one that concurrently looks back at her European ancestry and her childhood in Paris, while cohabiting and confusing her present in Montreal. I will then explore how memory and language interplay, connecting and displacing the fragments of her past and present. Then I will concentrate on the linguistic codes that surround the protagonist in Montreal, the external world that confronts her senses, to examine how she confronts them in order to make sense of her present as an immigrant woman. Finally I will examine how she attempts to align herself with other ethnics by writing her alienation, only to discover her undeniable difference as other.

A. Structure: linking time and place

La Québécoite is a story about the memories and impressions of a French-speaking Jewish woman from Budapest, who grew up in Paris of the 1950s and 1960s and then moved to Montreal in the 1970s. Her life in Montreal defines the setting for the novel's three chapters, which correspond to her journey through three neighbourhoods in Montreal, to locate her place and define herself as an ethnic woman. Within each neighbourhood, the novel's three sections mirror the protagonist's three different lives written on three narrative levels: those of "je," "elle," and Mortre.

The lives of "je," "elle," and Mortre, unmeasured in age or time, represent the life of the Jewish female wanderer, our anonymous female protagonist, on her journey. "La perte du nom, de la mère et du lieu" (61). Robin thus creates multiple lives for her narrator in the different places of the city she inhabits, allowing her to encounter diverse milieus of the Montreal landscape via the use of polyphony. The neighbourhoods of Montreal thus cross one another and displace the narrator protagonist in both place and time on her journey.

In the first chapter the narrator protagonist lives in Snowden ("Quartier d'immigrants à l'anglais malhabille où subsiste encore l'accent d'Europe centrale, où l'on entend parler yiddish, et où il est si facile de trouver des cornichons, du Râlé natté et du matze mail" (23)), an older Jewish neighbourhood, at the house of her elderly Hungarian aunt. There, she spends her time with an intellectual who studied at Columbia University and is in love with New York.

In chapter two she lives in Outrement ("...essayant de s'intégrer à la bourgeoisie québécoise, des fleurs de lys en fer forgé partout accrochées à son balcon" (99).), the "in" neighbourhood of the new bourgeois francophone. Outremont, a neighbourhood of psychoanalysts, university professors, and

lawyers, is the setting for her marriage to a militant Québécois nationalist, a government administrator who works in Quebec City and lives with her in Montreal.

In chapter three, the protagonist is displaced in and around Jean-Talon market, "quartier d'immigrants italiens et latino-américains," as well as immigrants of all origins. There, she lives with a Latin-American refugee, a Paraguayan who has escaped the oppressive military regime of General Stroessner. At the end of each section the protagonist, unable to settle herself, departs for and returns from Paris with the realization that, just as her life in Montreal changes, so too life in Paris has not stayed the same.

A desire to incorporate Montreal, to appropriate it, and to make from it a reconquered place is the main journey undertaken by the narrator (Harel 1992, 403); therefore, it is not surprising how detailed her descriptions of places are whether it be in the home of her Aunt Mimi, the house in Outrement, or the apartment in the Jean-Talon neighbourhood, through which the memory of the past is evoked:

> Distribuées sans ordre apparent des petites tables de noyer surmontées de lampes art-déco et encombrées de bibelots, de cendriers chipés à la closerie des Lilas dans lesquels traîneraient souvent des mégots de Gauloises.... Aux murs, des photos de famille, des lithographies... une plaque de rue de Paris et des miroirs (96-97).

The spatial and temporal disorganization lived through the protagonist in Montreal and linked to her immigrant condition helps Robin to work through her alienation, her inability to feel a sense of belonging anywhere: Paris and Montreal alternate in a series of flashbacks which overlap, although each city has a distinctive urban texture, complete with unique friends and lovers, streets and subway lines for the narrator.

B. Fragments of the past and present: memory and language

Characterized by its polyphonic discourse and its collage technique, the novel is a study of "the other," a deformed, fragmented image, made up of scattered sketches, historical fragments, and cultural pieces, including Robin's own poetry. These fragmented images are conveyed through a conglomeration of words and texts, a variety of languages, genres, and even type (including some Hebrew characters to evoke the visual pleasure of the Hebrew letter and literature and its leftist bent), and the intermingling at the level of the fictive universe of different voices, times, spaces, and characters who intermittently assume the first person before passing the narrative on to the next narrator.

The novel thus embarks on a quest with its protagonist to deal with her foreigness, through a series of strange meetings, communications, and searches for real encounters. Situated in the context of contemporary Quebec literature, the novel has been said to reflect the Quiet Revolution's link between culture and country, language and land, through telling the experience of other, of difference from that culture, language, and land from the point of view of an immigrant in Quebec (Quapp iv). In doing so, Robin demonstrates in her fictional quest an obsessive desire by those in power in Quebec to unify a disintegrated mythical nation, a heterogeneous people in their promised land.

In contrast to the mythical nation, Robin's novel also consists of imagined histories, written in the conditional French tense of the verb by the narrator "elle." These imagined histories are less successive than parallel, incomplete, implying they are not true. They also suggest that it is impossible to think about the identity of the female ethnic as homogeneous within any culture.

> On ne naît pas femme: on le devient. (Simone de Beauvoir)
> On ne devient pas Québécois. (Régine Robin; both cited in Purdy 1992i, 51)

Robin's Québécoite tells the story of her otherness, of strangeness and difference, and of silence imposed on the female immigrant: "Québec plus coite ("quiet") or Québec plus coït (coitus), a making out with the body and the name of Quebec (Sarkonak 100). As a character, she is alone, explains Madeleine Gagnon, a wandering Jew, coming from a history of disappropriation and of neglect into a territory which is as powerless as herself: "*Différance* is wandering--nomadic texts, mean(der)ings" (Derrida cited in Greenstein 1989, 12).

The narrator's différance is marked by her writing, her confusion of the past and the present. She compares her wandering from Snowden to Outrement with the fearful moves Jews made during World War II trying to avoid death. She knows that "tout ça débouche sur Auschwitz" (76) and "l'impossibilité de vivre après" (136).

As Anthony Purdy explains, what prevents her from rooting herself in Quebec is her "trop visible europocentrisme," "cette impossibilité par moment à sortir des cadres étroits de sa culture parisienne" (74) in order to embrace a culture where "on parle français et on pense américain" (83). As well, her valorization of difference, of heterogeneity, and her fear of homogeneity in Montreal that "tout doucement s'en irait vers une société plurielle sans qu'il y paraisse:" (195)

> La peur de l'homogénéité/de l'unanimité/du Nous excluant tous les autres/elle l'immigrante/la différente/la déviante./Elle hésiterait./Car il pourrait aussi y avoir une façon québécoise de/faire la chasse aux sorcières/car il pourrait aussi y avoir une façon québécoise d'être/ xénophobe et/antisémite (129).

Evoking painful memories of a life lived in Paris, three Parisian subway lines correspond with the three neighbourhoods of Montreal, her presently lived experience: the #10 line, Austerlitz-Michel-Ange/Molitor; the #6 line, Nation-Etoile via Denfert-Rochereau; and #8 line, Place Bolard to Charenton-

Ecoles. All three lines pass through Grenelle station, constituting a place of meeting within a cultural and historical memory. This place of meeting is close to the streets Nocard and Nélaton where the "Vélodrome d'Hiver" is located. The narrator's obsessive return to this symbolic place reminds the reader of the Great Roundup of July 16, 1942 in Paris where the Jews were taken prior to being transported to Auschwitz:

> APRES GRENELLE--JE NE SAIS PLUS/LA LIGNE SE PERD/DANS MA MEMOIRE/Les juifs/doivent/prendre/le/dernier/wagon./Il faisait beau ce 16 juillet 42/autour de la rue du DR FINLAY. de la rue NOCARD/de la rue NELATON/AUTOUR DE GRENELLE. XVe arrondissment./WURDEN VERGAST/L'opération s'appelait/VENT PRINTANIER/SA MERE--JAMAIS REVENUE/ELLE PLUS TARD EN AMERIQUE/WURDEN VERGAST/Du côté de GRENELLE/GUEDALI QUI S'EN SOUVIENT (70-71)?

In this passage the protagonist refers to the German code name "vent printanier" to highlight the loss of memory when wandering, and the powerlessness of language to speak about the loss of memory. "La parole immigrante traverse les mots--la voix d'ailleurs--la voix des morts" (61). In this manner, the narrator emphasizes the conflict in the novel between the imposed silence upon the immigrant, and the refusal of silence and the need to "[p]rendre la parole, rendre la parole aux immigrants, à leur solitude" (52-53).

Taking control of the language of the immigrant at the beginning of the novel, Robin indicates that it is not necessary to look for true characters nor for referential illusion, but instead for a metaphoric, poetic writing that takes history as object (Robin 1989, 133). This metaphoric writing can be explained by examining the psyche of the ethnic writer.

> Ce personnage fantôme m'échappe. Impossible á fixer dans cette géographie urbaine, dans cet espace mouvant. Dès qu'elle est installée, intégrée, elle s'enfuit, déménage, et m'oblige à casser le récit alors que je commençais à m'y installer moi-même, à y prendre goût, à me reposer. Elle prend corps et dès lors s'enfuit, me fait la nique (134).

In the interior world of immigrants the same metaphor is formulated upon every meeting with the other: the impossibility of sharing between the same and the other; the battle between persistance and erasing of traces that distinguishes between memory and the forgotten (Nepveu 1988, 203). The importance of history to Robin is thus reinforced throughout the novel:

> De m'être sentie autre, à part, si longtemps et si jeune, m'a donné une certaine idée de l'Histoire comme morte.... Ce fut comme si une réflexion sur l'Histoire n'était possible que par le détour de la fiction, que par le détour du mentir-vrai.... L'Histoire-fiction...s'agit de l'inscription de l'historique dans le texte littéraire, et des retombées idéologiques de cette écriture (Robin cited in Gagnon 149).

In this manner of questioning history, history can also question memory. The protagonist distinguishes between the national memory (or official), the collective memory, the scholarly memory (or historian), and the cultural memory (or literary). As the narrator states, memories are accumulated for the Jewish people, whose affiliation is based on a rooted historical affiliation:

> Une trace de Shtetl, à Montréal, à New York, à peine perceptible. L'Amérique clignote, borgne, lépreuse.... J'irai, de la cendre sur la tête, pour tout habit un sac, munie du livre de Job, j'irai pleurer le grand deuil du ghetto perdu./Ville schizophrène/clivée/déchirée (78).

Having difficulty in understanding why and how they had survived, Jewish immigrants recount memories from the past, which serve to bemuse as well as numb. This inability to make sense of surviving the Holocaust is common to both Robin's narrator and Bosco's protagonist in La femme de Loth. Robin, like her protagonist, feels guilty for having survived, while all of her Jewish ancestors perished. Echoing the words of Robin's protagonist, Monique Bosco's Hélène experiences this same sense of injustice: "L'étrange culpabilité. J'étouffais d'angoisse à l'idée de vivre au prix d'une horrible trahison qui se soldait par six millions de morts" (101).

As such, both ethnic women characters, having experienced World War II from Canadian soil, draw upon Kafka's words (the language of impossibility that lives in perpetual exile) to reflect on their own anguish. Confronted with the memory of the Holocaust and the necessity of constructing meaning from the tragic events of the past in order to diminish its pain, the novel offers an incomplete cultural memory (Harel 1992, 396). "ERRER. Noter toutes les différences, faire un inventaire, un catalogue, une nomenclature. Tout consigner pour donner plus de corps à cette existence" (149).

Representative of secular Jewish-Canadian writers, Robin is drawn to the spiritual and mythical past of her European ancestors: her past informed by memories of a culture that no longer exists. In a sense, she writes in Yiddish with Hassidic overtones and invokes Buberesque dialogues to overcome a felt post-Holocaust absence (Greenstein 1989, 5-6). The polyphony is part of the survivor's lesson about reading and writing in a time where beginnings and endings overlap (Robin 1989, 134).

Past oppression is remembered mythically, hence Montreal becomes this place "clivé" that recalls an unreal city: "Pour accrocher l'imaginaire d'une immigrante, il n'est pas nécessaire de coller au réel" (144). While collecting memories, the immigrant Québécois writer "occupies Québécois space" through the "imaginary" in a way that "the country extends beyond" (L'Hérault 55): "Budapest ou Paris. Ou Montréal. Quelle importance! Quelque part dans l'imaginaire de la ville" (180).

For Robin, the cultural memory serves to contrast the national memory. Therefore, there are numerous descriptions highlighting the Québécois collective memory: narratives of massacres of missionary fathers, citations of passages of manuals of catechism and of saintly history: but the novel doesn't present a national memory. Rather the novel creates a memory of "hors-lieu," immigrant language that is lived in exile in the ghettos of a collective memory of Judaism

continually forgotten and reconquered, and allows for a partial reconstitution of memory.

Linking her to the "ville imaginaire," the presence of Mimi Yente, the only living relative of the protagonist, illustrates the perpetual pain and sadness of the narrator's past and the loss of her mother: "Je n'ai pas d'aïeux. Tous morts à Auschwitz" (181). The loss of her mother, together with the shame of having lost the memory of the maternal language, establishes a familial novel. As Simon Harel explains, in the creation of a familial novel, the mother is replaced by an aunt to ensure the continuity of the memorial transmission. As "the particular human chain we are part of is central to our individual identity... not to know is to live with some of the disorientation and anxiety of the amnesiac" (Stone 7).

Ensuring that her niece does not forget her past, Mimi Yente continues to remind the narrator that she has transplanted her roots with her through her possession of the old samovar of Zhitomir and the celebration of the Sabbath: "c'est une façon de se souvenir qu'on est juif" (132). The memory of the shtetl, "son vrai pays qu'elle n'aurait jamais connu," of eastern Europe is thus symbolized in a feminine transmission through the narrator's aunt (100).

Another symbol of feminine transmission for Robin's protagonist is through song, played by the narrator on her aunt's piano. Her mystical and transcendental playing, contrast a number of old Yiddish songs with European works by Czerny and Chopin. The piano playing for Mimi Yente provides a moment in which the protagonist is able to reconcile her ancient roots with those of the modern present, symbolising the struggle between ethnicity and "success" in a world foreign to her Jewish past (Palmer 78). Melfi's Nina hopes for a similar transcendency via pregnancy, wherein taking control over her body connects her to her Italian heritage and her womanhood.

As the transmission of language, culture and history is matrilineal, Robin's familial novel excludes male characters except in the guise of strangers: (Harel 1992, 407) "Moshe serait mort depuis longtemps--la tante aurait vendu la boulangerie à des juifs hongrois de Budapest. Elle se serait retirée dans sa maison--c'est là qu'elle l'aurait accueillie--je ne sais plus quand" (26).

Besides her deceased uncle, the author inserts other fictional characters in the novel to represent a male presence for the narrator. With the absence of the father and the insertion of lovers, Harel points out, there is a source of misalliance for the protagonist: "Faudrait-il tout recommencer?/La changer de quartier, d'espérance?/Lui trouver un nouvel amant ou un autre métier?/Encore une fois essayer, mais le coeur s'impatiente./Il en a marre" (168).

In longing and searching for the geographical and cultural origins of the self, Smaro Kamboureli explains, the narrator configures her foreigness in the shape of a melancholy lover (as do Bosco and di Michele's protagonists, Hélène with Pierre and Rita with Nikos respectively). The foreigner exists, survives within her, because she falls in love with her estrangement, falls into that geographical, cultural, and linguistic gap that separates her from her origins. Her melancholy is the outcome of her nostalgia for the homeland, the abandoned family, the memories she left behind: she thus locates her power in her marginalization as ethnic (Kamboureli 1993i, 147).

This gap portrays the narrator's act of "devenir-étranger." The narrator must therefore find where she fits within the generations of her ancestors in a historical context in order to construct her future. Like Mimi Yente, the immigrant characters of the novel are "à la recherche d'un langage, de simples mots pour représénter l'ailleurs, l'épaisseur de l'étrangeté, de simples mots, défaits, rompus, brisés, désémantisés;" (52) and it is necessary for them to

"trouver une position dans le langage, un point d'appui, un repère fixe, un point stable, quelque chose qui ancre la parole alors qu'il n'y a qu'un tremblé du texte, une voix muette, des mots tordus" (18-19).

Kamboureli expands on the role of the immigrant's language: "My immigrant condition affords me the (perverse?) pleasure of a doubled view. My language is the window that looks onto my home and into my homelessness" (Kamboureli cited in Hutcheon 49). Similar to the plight of all multilingual immigrants, the narrator, who speaks both French and Yiddish (in addition to Russian, Ukranian, Hungarian, Hebrew, Spanish, English), stays astride of two cultures and homes: "Désormais le temps de l'ailleurs, de l'entre-trois langues, de l'entre-deux alphabets, de l'entre-deux mers, de l'entre-deux mondes, l'entre-deux logiques, l'entre-deux nostalgies" (67).

The narrator's journey is thus characterized by a passage from the maternal language of the past to the vehicular language of the country of adoption, producing a coming together and a crossing of linguistic codes: "Tu as toujours habité un langage, une phonie qui tantôt sonne germanique, tantôt tinte hébraïque, tantôt slave aussi. Un langage carrefour, errant mobile comme toi, comme elle" (135). It is during this quest of belonging that she feels "in between" languages, cultures, and cities.

In this manner the protagonist, the Québécoite, is the immigrant language of silence which never finds its place geographically or culturally, because the narrator never appropriates it. She can therefore retain her maternal language, Yiddish, although it never truly belongs to her. The Yiddish accent, the expressions, and the attachments to her native culture become her life support. With the Yiddish language as a substitute for her native soil, the promised land, Montreal society remains other and thus threatening to her.

For the narrator, Yiddish is made up "de drôles de signes. Ceux de ton enfance, de ta mère, de ton seul pays ce langage.... Une image graphique qui est tout un paysage. Un langage sang, mort, blessure, un langage pogrom et peur. Un langage mémoire" (135). Yiddish establishes a link between immigrant writing and feminine writing, between heterogeneity and feminism.

This association is more explicit in the second part of the novel where there is an identification of homogeneity and the patriarchal within Québécois culture: the immigrant marries the country through an intermediary of a Québécois "pure laine," a deputy minister. Working in Quebec City and living in Montreal, he serves as a constant reminder of her "francité" (L'Hérault 70). He further reminds her that her French is not the same French as that of the Québécois people. In Montreal:

> On y parle français, on ne serait plus obligées de parler une langue étrangère même si avec le temps, cette langue nous est devenue si familière, si quotidienne, rudesse de l'hébreu, érotisme de l'anglais quotidien, fantasmes de l'étrange, de l'inquiétante étrangeté. Mais ce n'est pas non plus notre français à nous (Robin 1988, 23).

Discovering that a language embodies its people, the narrator senses her alienation and otherness in the urban space of Montreal. For the French-Canadian, the other is constituted by multiplicity: a desire of integration into the urban literatures of France and England; a desire of merging and fading into the margins of English-Canada; a desire of being associated with a contemporary Quebec now an agent of domination by English-Canada; a fascination with the American media; a desire of being recognized as an integrating part of the Canadian mosaic; and a desire to adopt a false innocence of a certain "francophile" identity as a distinct society (Paré 77). The ethnic living in Quebec shares many of these desires, except that ethnics also experience the domination of the Québécois culture.

C. Fragmentation of the symbolic

This new Québécois culture in transition is centred on language and constitutes a symbolic space in which it must place itself:

> The new "lingua franca" of the Québécois modernity will emerge from the meeting between two languages historically characterized by weakness: the alienated langauge of colonized Quebec and the fragile language of immigrant writings. In confronting itself in other languages, in letting itself voluntarily cross through other languges, French acquires thus the virtues of a strong language that presides in the circulation and transformation of other cultures. This is the assumption of its weakness, that returns here in force, naming the real without interpreting it, assuming itself in its sparkling infinity in its fractures, its roundabout accents, in its total freedom (Caccia and Tassinari cited in Simon and Leahy 397).

1. Signs and lists

The foreigner as other living in the "ville schizophrène" becomes a threat to the uncovering of the myth of reconciliation, of acceptance of its own schizophrenia. Coming from elsewhere the protagonist is not allowed to enter into the fiction of Quebec. As a response she deciphers all the codes, signs and inscriptions within the city to examine its spaces for meaning for her past and present. In the act of writing she can thus locate herself within the fragments of a Montreal which although not her homeland, may accomodate her difference (Gagnon 152).

Robin's use of signs also marginalizes the protagonist within her environment, denying her access to the city's literary circle. Yet the protagonist also discovers throughout her journey that there is not one literary centre in Montreal. On the contrary, there are as many centres as there are stories as there are ethnic groups. In trying to escape from the margins of exile and migrate toward the centre of

Québécois literature, the protagonist can only find the mythical centres of Outrement, Snowden, or Jean Talon: the literary centre is fragmented.

Without locating a literary centre, Robin's narrator cannot identify herself with a colonized people: her history embodies different psychic scars which prevent her from truly empathizing with a Québécois identity and its history. In this sense, the narrator as a foreigner cannot align herself with any of the political or cultural causes in Quebec and experience a connection with the Québécois in a unified and centred history:

> Ses bouts de rêves--ville reprisée, ville d'exils juxtaposée, de solitudes amoncelées qui se côtoient dans se voir pas de reprise perdue, les fils se voient dans la courture. Paroles égarées à la dérive sans points d'appui. Paroles étrangères aux idiomes incompréhensibles, paroles des communions perdues des réseaux disloqués paroles qui se rencontrent à l'aveuglette dans la ville, paroles nues parole autre, la parole immigrante (186).

This intermingling of cultures is worked through a double nostalgia for the narrator's real past and an imaginary past (she refers to France and to eastern European Yiddish culture). This allows for the disintegration of the reality from which she is excluded and a disintegration of the work itself: "Ville schizophrène/patchwork linguistique/bouillie ethnique, plein de grumeaux/purée de cultures disloquées/ folklorisées/figées/pizza/souvlaki/paëlla" (80).

Thus Robin's novel is a work simultaneously of mourning historic loss relative to the Holocaust and celebrating the present. The narrator's inscription of her fragmented past and present is dislocated; the Yiddish past resides next to the torture of Jesuit missionaries, the menus of restaurants, the charts of classification of hockey teams, the descriptions of places (Côte-des-Neige, Outrement). The immigrant's words are not a linear narrative, but are made up of historical moments,

disconnected texts, as well as samples of poetry to portray the fragments of her life.

The continuous interference of signs takes the reader on a journey through Montreal that is alive, yet suffused with death; it is an "apocalyptic" experience as well as a "euphoric" and transforming one (Nepveu 1988, 205-206). In order to familiarize and understand Montreal in her wanderings, the narrator knows she cannot "rencontrer Montréal que par traces, signes, symboles, fragments, sans signification, morceaux, débris, tessons hors d'usage" (196).

There are two distinct types of signs or lists that run through the novel. The first is formed by a series of lists characterizing nothing (simple catalogues, inventories, names) which are all linked to the narrator's Montreal reality: a list of "des grands magazins" and banks; perceived signs along the street to Longueuil, of crêperies and bars, of businesses lining different arteries; an inventory of subway stations, real estate agencies, fast-food restaurants and hotels; and a review of advertisements of television programs. In her alienated state, Mary di Michele's Rita too listens to the language of Toronto: "to the horns of traffic, to sirens, to orders for more beer" (110) to take inventory of the city. Through these signs, the consumption of the urban landscape is shown in order to piece together the city to "l'assimiler, de se l'incorporer" (Robin 1983, 167).

In observing the diversity of signs of Montreal, Robin's protagonist must: "Noter toutes les différences.... Tout noter.... L'amour obsessionnel des listes, des inventaires, des archives. Historienne du rien, du fugace. Angoisse de la trace à garder" (196). By examining these linguistic signs of Montreal, the protagonist tries to work through the recollection of a fictional history. She struggles against the erasing of things, giving back to this city without time or place a sense of unity.

This threat of erasure exists as an ethnic not only in Montreal, but also on a historical level as well. Robin's quest is to remind those who have forgotten about their history and stories as does Mimi Yente for the protagonist:

> Revenir à Chmielnicki. La geste des cosaques Zaporozhye. Montrer les enjeux et le système de l'arenda dans lequel les juifs se trouvaient pris--la colonisation des terres par la Noblesse polonaise--Bogdan Chmielnicki qui se veut le grand hetman d'une Ukraine autonome.... Tu ne sortiras pas du ghetto. Tout ramène à la dernière guerre. Au camp de la neige avec mon numéro sur l'avant-bras gauche (46).

Mimi Yente cannot erase the memory of the suffering of her ancestors at the murderous hands of a Chmielnicki or Hitler. Nor does she hide from the example of her new country who would not open its doors to the Jewish people during World War II. Forgetting for the victim is a strategy, emphasized by the narrator, to obviate the pain of memory. This is the case for Mary Melfi's Nina, who tries to forget the pain of her infertility. Thus Robin's protagonist, like Nina, emphasizes the importance of remembering through these intermingled fragments of the past and present.

The second type of lists is fragments of description, notations of sensation that interfere with space. Thus referring to Paris of the past reinforces the memory of the narrator:

> Chevaleret. Place d'Italie avant l'éventrement du quartier.... Cette place si calme, si ombragée. C'est là qu'ils ont tué P. Goldmann--les souvenirs du juif polonais né en France s'arrêtent là. UN JUIF POLONAIS ASSASSINE EN FRANCE. Tu te souviens de cette douleur violente quand tu appris la nouvelle. Autour de la Place il y a des vieilles maisonnettes bordées de jardinets. On y serait bien dans cette maison (99).

The picturesque images of the garden and house in Montreal are juxtaposed against Parisian politics. In this manner the memory of Paris is linked to the past of the narrator.

The split revealed between the two series of signs includes less of a distinction between Montreal reality and Paris reality than between a "brave modern world," deprived of

a soul on the one hand and a "convivial city," a "ville mère" on the other hand (Frédéric 1992, 68). According to Madeleine Frédéric, Montreal becomes reappropriated and Paris becomes dehumanized. These two series of signs therefore expand the whole of the human condition and their inscription in history.

2. Split subjectivity

To enter into this new symbolic of acculturation in the "convivial city", the immigrant narrator "je" creates for herself a character "elle," an autobiographical projection in the third person. With this character she explores the different possibilities of integration within contemporary Montreal in the novel's three chapters (Quapp 8).[11]

"Je" writes a story about another woman, "elle," an immigrant to whom the narrator lends many of her own experiences as an expatriate. The story within the story is told in the conditional mode. This story of the other is a longed for adoption "enracinement" of the fictional character by Quebec:

> Pourtant elle chercherait par tous les moyens à saisir la conjoncture politique, à la sentir. Il lui répéterait jour après jour que n'étant pas d'ici elle ne pourrait jamais comprendre. Elle aurait fini par déposer les armes. Exclue. Seule dans cette ville-collage, cette ville-livre, cette ville-Histoire (139-140).

But foreign languages within a francophone context threaten meaning and subject-formation, including the notion of a coherent national identity: words are feared because they cannot be assimilated, and words in another language emphasize a split within subjectivity (between "je" and "elle") (Gunew 1993ii, 17). Thus in chapter two of the novel the protagonist

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[11] Poststructuralist theory (including deconstruction and postmodernism) offers a means of situating the speaking subject, of defining intersections and contradictions of competing interest groups (Gunew and Yeatman xiii).

discovers: "Même ma langue respire l'air d'un autre pays" (52).

"Elle," the narrator's double and alter ego (a fictional, autobiographical, and anonymous character created by the narrator) is a writer who is trying to write a best-seller to remove herself from her impoverished existence. The hoped for best seller is a story of a teacher named Mortre Himmelfarb, who teaches Russian-Jewish literature in the Jewish Studies Department at McGill University.

The novel folds back on itself in a self-reflexive manner, as "elle" writes about this old central European Jewish professor who has been asked to teach a course on three false Jewish Messiahs: Sabbatai Zevi, Solomon Molcho, and Jacob Frank. Mortre is written by "elle" in the form of an interior monologue, told as if he were rendering the stories of the three false Messiahs for his course syllabus. Each of the three false Messiah stories parallels the narrators' movement from Snowden, to Outremont, and finally to Jean Talon.

The interior monologue rendered by Mortre is full of contempt for the historically illiterate anglophone students he must teach: he likens them to the psychotic Sabbatai Zevi. Yet *Mortre* will never teach the course, for he dies in the process of constructing the syllabus for the course. Mortre's death leaves the novel of "elle" "en abyme," destined to a similar fate of an abrupt and unanticipated end, before the course or the novel within the novel begin.

Mortre's story never really begins or ends, even though there is a beginning (Minh-ha cited in Kamboureli 1993i, 143). Its non-linearity is similar to the circular nature of La femme de Loth, which begins and ends in the same spot (cf. Kogawa's Obasan). Like Bosco's Hélène, the impossibility of telling a complete story in a linear manner is shared by all of Robin's three narrators: old Mortre, "elle," as well as the authorial "je" within the framing story.

Yet for those writing outside of the dominant discourse, linearity represents alienation and foreigness: each narrator thus exists outside the centres of political power and discourse. From this position, Mortre provides a privileged point of view from which to reflect on history: not only of teaching it, but of writing it:

> Pas d'ordre. Ni chronologique, ni logique, ni logis. Rien qu'un désir d'écriture et cette prolifération d'existence. Fixer cette porosité du probable, cette micro-mémoire de l'étrangeté. Etaler tous les signes de la différence: bulles de souvenirs, pans de réminiscences mal situées arrivant en masse sans texture, un peu gris. Sans ordre, c'étaient des enchaînements lâches, des couleurs sans contours, des lumières sans clarté, des lignes sans objets. Fugaces. La nuit noire de l'exil. L'Histoire en morceaux (15).

By utilizing the old Jewish history professor, Robin demonstrates that history can be written on a border, an "entre-deux," playing on the knowledge of disciplines, crossing them, ironising them, and reducing them.

Living in the "entre-deux," the comings and goings between Paris and Montreal reinforce the foreigness of the Québécois culture. The impossibility of mixing cultural imaginations and memories is such that the displacement of the character to the interior of the city identifies the problems posed by cohabitation and coexistence within the different ethnic and cultural communities of Quebec. In so doing Robin exemplifies the impossiblity of superimposing collective memories onto national ones:

> Alors quoi. Inintégrable la jacobine, la rouge, la communarde? Impossible de Coquetieren avec cet imaginaire de droite, cet héritage de droite--héritiers de Louis Veuillot de Paul Bourget. Tout s'appelle Lionel Groulx. Les nouvelles stations de métro, les pavillons d'université, les plaques de monuments. Notre--Etat--français--nous l'aurons--et--j'aime les Etats--forts--et --les corporations--les chefs. La race--Action française --Action nationale. Très peu pour moi. Très peu pour elle. Pourquoi pas un monument aux grévistes de Murdochville ou à Fred Rose qui s'ennuie à Varsovie! Et puis la fleur de lys a pour elle d'étranges connotations: royalistes, antisémites, nobliaux imbus de leurs anciens

> privilèges. J'accuse Du Paty de Clam et Darquier de Pellepoix et tous les De qui ont contribué à nous faire arrêter en juillet 1942. Elle saurait pourtant que les symboles ont une histoire, qu'ils peuvent inverser leur signification, qu'ils circulent d'étranges façons (130).

This quotation demonstrates that the symbols of history cannot be the same for both the ethnic and the Québécois. That they both perceive themselves as minorities under the domination of English-Canada is their only commonality.

Even the old "fleur de lys" represents different things for the narrator according to place; in France it is connected to the political right, royalists and antisemitism, and in Quebec it is symbol of Québécois nationalism. For the narrator moreover, Montreal symbolizes the collapse of the past represented by the roundup of July 1942 in Paris. And Paris, the city of her youth and formative years, symbolizes faded memories of a traumatic childhood lived in hiding during the German Occupation. All of these symbols establish the protagonist's feeling of difference, torn between nostalgia for the Paris of her youth and Montreal of the 1970s.

Yet it is within Montreal that the multiplicity of the narrator's memories is allowed to emerge and interact with the landscape. Thus the city acquires the status of a difficult integration of space, "hors-lieu," in which the idea of nation has been fragmented and pluralized from within:

> DES GHETTOS/DES CLIVAGES/CHACUN SA LANGUE/SA COMMUNAUTE/CHACUN SON QUARTIER/SON DEPUTE/SES GATEAUX. SON JOURNAL. SA RELIGION/CHACUN SON HISTOIRE/SEULS/A PART/NOUS. VOUS. EUX./ N'y a-t-il rien d'universel ici?/Ciels clivés au raté de l'Histoire/au raté de l'exil/solitudes mauves dressées les unes contre les autres/les unes en face des autres./Comme le ciel est loin et quel silence givre sur les/branches!/Le texte bruit des imaginaires gelés (152-153).

In this landscape, the narrator can reflect upon the ghettoization and folklorization of communities in Montreal. She comes to realize that the city permits exile through its ghettos, be they in Snowden, Outremont, or Jean Talon. On Montreal's invisible ghetto, Mordechai Richler also comments:

the "ghetto of Montreal has no real walls and no true dimensions. The walls are the habits of atavism and the dimensions are an illusion. But the ghetto exists all the same" (Richler cited in Greenstein 1989, 15). Although Montreal's ghetto may not be divided by concrete walls, its presence for the narrator is undeniable.

Conscious of the fact that Jews have been chased from one ghetto to another, the narrator relates the old ghettos of Europe to the new ghettos in North America. Living in this imaginary ghetto in Montreal, the immigrant is doubly victimized: she is the object of either indifference or condescension and folklorization, by both her countries of origin and of adoption.

Between the ghettoization and folklorization of ethnic cultures in Montreal on the one hand, and the assimilation to a homogeneous Québécois culture on the other hand, Robin's novel proposes the solution of the "entre-deux:" a new social imaginary that is pluricultural with a fluid identity (Purdy 1992i, 55). She can live as herself in exile in a foreign city and can justify her loss of identity, a marginality that isn't immediately confined to the margins. The exile becomes an interiorized construct:

> Le réel n'est plus une rencontre, une conjonction du temps et de l'espace. La dichotomie est reconnue, la séparation accusée. Séparation entre sentiment et acte, réel et conscience. L'exil n'est plus un rapport avec l'espace mais une expression de la division de l'être, du conflit entre réel et conscience, acte et théâtralité. L'exil est interiorisé. Il devient une dimension de l'être. Et d'abord l'exil de la parole (Kattan cited in Nepveu 1988, 47).

The exile, as Naïm Kattan explains, establishes the country as an uninhabitable reality, instigating a quest of history, dispossession, lack, alienation, death, and at the same time discovery of what the immigrant truly possesses, her self.

While wandering the narrator discovers that the mythical Quebec is inhabited by immigrants, exiles, unexpected

arrivals, conquerors, and the conquered. She meets the "ethniques" in the third chapter through her Paraguayan radical socialist lover (similar to di Michele's Rita's Greek Marxist lover, "affirming good left-wing democracy" (26)). Both her lover and Mimi Yente, symbolized by their Meerschaum pipes, remind the narrator of her ethnic identity:

> Ils seraient son vrai pays. Les exilés, de nulle part, sans attente, parlant toutes les langues et affrontant tous les défis historiques. Leurs paysages par moment tricoteraient un patchwork, bigarré.... On les appellerait des 'ethniques' pour les différencier des Québécois et des Anglais (139).

Speechless, she chooses her place consciously, recognizing her own and Quebec's love-hate relationship with respect to its borders. Not feeling "at home" in the Jean Talon neighbourhood with Italians and Latin-Americans, she migrates with her ethnic boyfriend back to Snowden, the Jewish immigrant ghetto, where they run an antique shop.

Both rejected and accepted in Quebec, she never experiences complete realization of her self, nor acceptance in Montreal. Yet at a distance from Paris, Budapest, and Zhitomir, she realizes she must stop wandering from neighbourhood to neighbourhood in search of her identity: "On quitte un ghetto pour un autre" (184).

> Challenging boundaries of "différance": a dividing line between centre and circumference, Zion and Disapora, origin and margin, presence and absence, sacred and profane, accomplishment and deferment, tradition and adventure, promised land and desert--this border accentuates the ambiguities of the wandering ethnic (Greenstein 1989, 200).

In order to discover where she belongs, the narrator's double "elle" returns to France at the end of each chapter. Finding her immigrant voice upon each return, she realizes that "[l]a France aurait changé" which prompts the ultimate irony at the end of the novel: "à propos, il paraît que la place du Québec est à Saint-Germain-des-Près" (200). Similar to Robin's protagonist, Bosco's Hélène realizes her sense of

rootlessness: "Je suis content d'être femme, juive, sans pays, patrie, famille, biens. Sans rien" (262-263). She finishes by understanding that she can never root herself and that she must live in "l'entre-deux:"

> Elle sentirait qu'elle ne pourrait jamais tout à fait habiter ce pays, qu'elle ne pourrait jamais tout à fait habiter aucun pays./Pas de lieu, pas d'ordre./Mémoire divisée à la jointure des/mots/Les couches muettes du langage,/brisées/La parole immigrante en suspens/entre/deux HISTOIRES (147).

Writing in the mythic language, fabricating an image of the ethnic, permits the creation of an imaginary territory for the ethnic writer, a reterritorialization. In returning to both her imagined and real past via her mythic language (Hebrew) and her vernacular language (Yiddish) to confront her rootlessness in Montreal, Robin's mother tongue, Yiddish, becomes her mythic language, the key to accessing her imagined past and her history as a Jewish woman.

By playing these two languages off each other, the protagonist is able to reach the "beyond" and successfully live in the "here and now." This strategy is also employed by Bosco's protagonist in her journey, as well as Melfi and di Michele's protagonists in their use of standard Italian and their Italian dialects. For these women, language becomes a feminine transmission that occurs as a result of a return to the past (either imagined or real) and a coming to terms with their mother tongues and their ethnic backgrounds.

The journey from the sages of eastern Europe to the young Jewish protagonist are thus linked in a new fictional history, where the past, present, and future exist in the "now." The nostalgic desire is to reconstruct these fragments of lost memory so that through the pain of remembering she can reappropriate her pain, and her self.

The protagonist's experience of exile is interiorized in order to imagine herself elsewhere, let out from the confined country to be able to reinvent herself: "We recognize that one

becomes a foreigner in another country because one is already a foreigner from within" (Kristeva cited in Kamboureli 1993i, 144). Forging a new language in which difference is inscribed, her voice of the other echoes, shattering the wall of the reader's (Québécois) silence and ignorance for that which is not "at home" in the home of others. For Robin, the result is a "bonheur d'écriture" in which the reader participates, for it is a writing rooted in the text itself, the absurd space where words meet at the crossroads and live beyond borders.

Creating a home has been a resurfacing theme of Canadian writers for decades. This journey in search of a home shared by Monique Bosco, Mary Melfi, Mary di Michele, and Régine Robin weighs heavily upon ethnic women. Melfi's Nina questions her place: "Home? Where can that be? In one's childish memories? Besides, the urge to create something out of nothing might have manifested itself there too" (31). Mocking the idea of creating a home, she compares humans to animals "building and re-building our nests" (92).

di Michele's Rita, on the other hand, knows that her home guards her memories: "It's my house. And besides liking my own space, it also happens to have a lot of good memories" (200). The journey for a home becomes inscribed in the ethnic woman writer's textual quest for a cultural reality, affecting her life from birth until death. At a Jewish funeral service, the rabbi will state the deceased has finally reached his/her eternal home. Nino Ricci, in both of his novels, Lives of the Saints and Glass Houses, has his male protagonists return to their native Italy at the time of their death, as does Maria Ardizzi's Vanni in Made in Italy.

But for women who have emigrated to Canada, their eternal home cannot be found in heaven nor in their native country. They have become transcultural wanderers, living in exile, "le voyageur perdu longtemps dans le désert," living within their interior landscapes (Bosco 1970, 232).

Ethnic women writers need to root themselves somewhere so they choose the process of writing to work through this complex journey of finding a sense of belonging on a mythical level: "Réduits au silence, à l'errance, à la perte de leur Histoire, de leur mémoire, enfermés dans le mythe" (Robin 1983, 80). Thus the ethnic woman must return through her imaginary to her only promised land: writing her journey.

V. CONCLUSION

> All of us, long after we've left our original families, keep at least some of these stories with us, and they continue to matter, but sometimes in new ways. At moments of major life transitions, we may claim certain of our stories, take them over, shape them, reshape them, put our own stamp on them, make them part of us instead of making ourselves part of them. We are always in conversation with them, one way or another. The ancestral figures in them... often become a major part of our imaginative life. They can, along with other powerful cultural archetypes, maybe from fiction or film, serve as our role models and guides (Stone 8).

La Québécoite, La femme de Loth, Under My Skin, and Infertility Rites are literary experiments, like research in progress, attempting to write an institution to house the female ethnic in which the dialogism serves as a strategy of resistance and of legitimation. As their stories attest to, immigrant women battle against failure, dependence, and fragmentation, assuming a status of "non-identity" within the dominant culture.

Régine Robin, Monique Bosco, Mary di Michele, and Mary Melfi's novels each inscribe their torturous journeys in the form of a novel. But even the novels' forms have to expand in order to catalogue the physical and social barriers that make it difficult for their immigrant characters to find paradise in the new world.

Perhaps they engage in this process on behalf of ethnic women in Canada, to redefine their "intersecting identities" and ensure legitimation within the Canadian mosaic. For di Michele and Melfi, ethnic writers who left their native countries at a young age, the memory of their country of origin, Italy, is very much fictional, giving rise to a journey in the imaginary. As di Michele explains: "I don't want to discard the past. Like everyone else I want to rewrite it, to inscribe it" (di Michele cited in Norris 6).

For Bosco and Robin, who arrived in Quebec as young adults from France (which as Jewish survivors of the Holocaust does not represent their spiritual promised land), their journey compels them to return through memory to their Jewish heritage, to a now vanished past whose roots lie in eastern Europe. It is a unique "hypercultural language" that is utilized by the aforementioned four authors in writing their memories (Ducharme 163). Their dialogue and language is very much representative of first generation immigrants, both in the signs and symbols used to shape their present urban landscapes (in Montreal and Toronto) and in the political and cultural metaphors of difference that define them. Not surprisingly, they all engage in sacred dialogues with their biblical and literary ancestors and archetypes, who constitute their "real" and "imagined" past. "Sans culture, une langue meurt. Sans culture, un peuple disparaît. La culture exprime le dynamisme d'un peuple et la vigueur de sa langue" (Cultural Federation of French-Canadians cited in Paré 18).

The plethora of signs and symbols utilized are the markings of a contemporary migrant culture in its journey of self definition. Traversing this labyrinth are centuries of scenery hidden in layers of symbolism and meaning that the immigrant attempts to define in the present. These ethnic women writers ritualize signs in their writing, because it is their task to sift through the experience of their profound disorder and attempt to reconfigure it to define themselves as ethnics and as women.

Defining ethnicity is difficult, as ethnicity territorializes on one level as literature written in English or French, and deterritorializes on another, as literature that contradicts the dominant culture's language and discourse (Loriggio 1990ii, 86). One strategy utilized is to incorporate mythical dialogue via the imaginary. This dialogue adopts a polyphonous, multilingual tone with both figurative and transformational powers capable of reflecting the many voices

within the ethnic woman. It further allows both a cultural and a spiritual reterritorialization, rewriting the symbols of the dominant patriarchal culture. This postmodern allegorization of literary language in effect replaces the more traditional female ethnic writer's language of silence. This idea is treated in Nepveu's text L'Ecologie du Réel:

> *Ecologie de l'ici*: amènagement, gestion des ressources, gestion du moi vision systématique et environnementale, rituels de séparation et de reconfiguration, rituels de l'impureté à la fois menaçante et créatrice, jeux de formes, conscience des énergies (Nepveu 1988, 210).

To create a semblance of order out of their existence, the protagonists in La Québécoite, La femme de Loth, Under My Skin, and Infertility Rites also research and transcribe their life stories. "L'écriture, sans doute le véritable pays de ces femmes en quête d'un pays.... Les femmes d'ici avaient un air de liberté inconnu de toi, un autre rapport à leurs corps" (Robin 1983, 134).

Unable to be both subject and author of their own discourses, they become invisible, a product of the multicultural "mosaic." As a result of becoming characters exiled in a story that contains them, they must fight for their existence, their identity must be recaptured through the word. As Jean-François Lyotard once said, "to speak is to fight, in the sense of playing--in the sense of having to disclose ourselves to ourselves, of having to re-create ourselves for others. Through words. Through storytelling" (Cited in Kamboureli 1993i, 151).

As we have witnessed, the journey that is the female ethnic storytelling process writes a past and present situated in a contemporary Canadian city (a multitude of separate cultural universes). All protagonists, warned to "never look back" to and "never forget" their histories, must defy their warnings in order to make a journey that will do exactly that. Rita, Hélène, the Québécoite, and Nina all explore their pasts to uncover and remember the pain and loss that is their ethnic

touchstone, suffering their journeys without the hope of immediate liberation.

To confront their foreign environment and redefine their cultural reality and their selves as women, the female characters must all go through a rite of passage: "Sans papiers d'identité," "[i]l faudra recommencer" (Bosco 1970, 217,221). This rite requires they reappropriate their bodies, their status as autonomous women, a transformation that can only be achieved by writing their stories: be it through writing and remembering their lovers as in Bosco's, di Michele's and Robin's novels; wandering from place to place in search of memories as in Robin's novel; or via the journey of conquering one's infertility as in Melfi's novel. Bosco's Hélène echoes the sentiments of the three other protagonists on their journey to self-realization: "Je n'écris ce roman que pour éloigner l'échéance de la vérité" (Bosco 1970, 42).

Gilles Deleuze explains that the role of memory in reclaiming one's cultural identity is called the process of remembering. A move toward truth, it is not a voluntary process:

> we search for truth when we are led to it as a function of a concrete situation; when we [undergo some sort of violation] are somehow violated and pushed to search for it: Truth betrays itself through involuntary signs (Cited in Verdicchio 1990i, 118).

Through writing their interior selves, the four ethnic women protagonists acquire a more complete sense of understanding their selves: where they belong and where their futures lie. In this process the protagonists also realize that they cannot adopt any discourse that is dominant; they must write their own. To do otherwise would be to privilege one system, representing it as "truth," while disallowing their own multiplicity to thrive. Thus the many truthed universes they journey within reveal a structure behind which lies their self realization: a play of instincts, impulses, desires, and fears

which they must will to appropriate (Nietzsche cited in Verdicchio 1990i, 119). Melfi's Nina explains the process of recreation as being synonymous with acquiring knowledge: "I can re-create (a self, myself, unselfish). A baby will build up my self-confidence; my emotional data bank. Keep me sane" (Melfi 1991, 13). The discovery of truth by the ethnic woman is analogous to a rebirth, a reproduction of a strong identity capable of opposing any threats of disappropriation.

The creation of this identity, written by means of remembering and redefining literature and history, provides the four protagonists with the strength necessary to complete their journeys. Stephen Mitchell quotes in his notes section to Rilke's Sonnets to Orpheus that Rilke identified the deepest creative expression with the feminine: "The deepest experience of the creative artist is feminine, for it is an experience of conceiving and giving birth" (Cited in di Michele 1991, 15). Perhaps this source of strength is feminine, but the act of creation of self as woman remains a mystery to all four authors: "Could it be God fucked it up X billion years ago trying to reproduce itself? We are its missing pieces: the reason why it is now malfunctioning" (Melfi 1991, 65).

Perhaps it is in revealing the underbelly of the ethnic female experience in Canada that the journey of these Italian and Jewish Canadian women writers hits so close to home: these are the journeys all ethnic women in Canada take. Writing the body to access their power and inscribe their place in time, ethnic women writers have transformed their silence in an explosion of language.

These writers have laid a path for future ethnic women writers. One can only imagine what limits or borders others will cross. Perhaps the task will always require reappropriating a voice and vision for the waves of ethnic women that continue to arrive in Canada (even when one "lives" in one of the two official languages). No doubt the works of

Bosco, Robin, di Michele, and Melfi will serve as models for future women ethnic writers in their literary endeavours. The questions of identity that fuel the quest of the ethnic woman writer amidst the constantly changing environment that is the Canadian mosaic, will always beg to be answered. One can only hope that the ethnic women's literary and artistic presence will continue to be felt, as reflected in the words of Trinh Minh-ha: "S/he who writes, writes. In uncertainty, in necessity. And does not ask whether she is given the permission to do so or not" (Cited in Neuman and Stephenson 3).

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